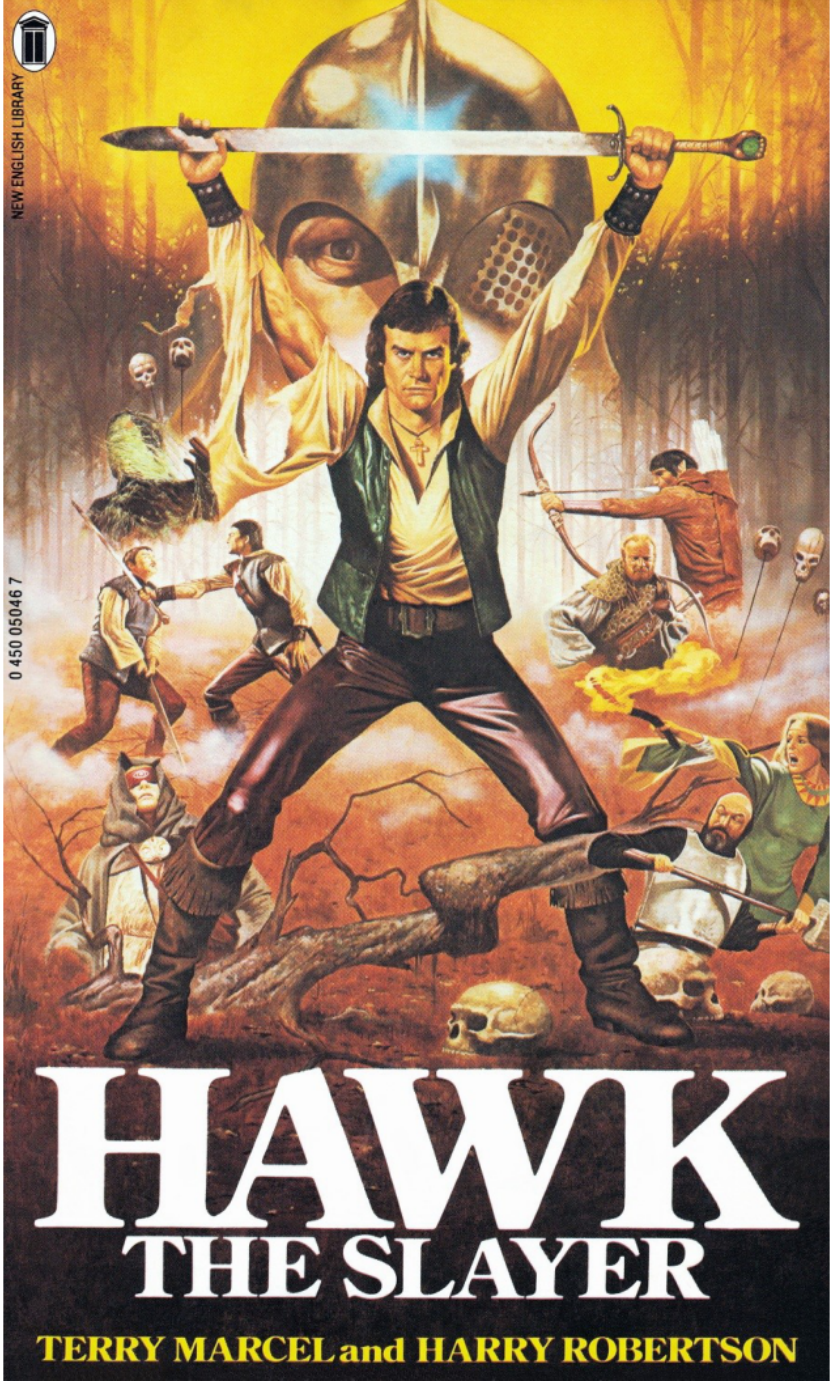
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HAWK
THE SLAYER
TERRY MARCEL and HARRY ROBERTSON

*In a time when the dark clouds of chaos covered the land and the roads were filled with death, Voltan The Dark One rode out …*

*Against him stood one man, armed with the legendary mindsword whose blade moved at the speed of thought.*

*Hawk The Slayer. The warrior marked by destiny to cut down The Dark One …*

JACK GILL presents for
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# HAWK THE SLAYER

starring
**JACK PALANCE • JOHN TERRY**

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FERDY MAYNE • GRAHAM STARK

Executive Producer
BERNARD J. KINGHAM

Produced by
HARRY ROBERTSON

Written by
TERRY MARCEL and HARRY ROBERTSON

Directed by
TERRY MARCEL

# HAWK THE SLAYER

Terry Marcel and
Harry Robertson

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FIRST NEL PAPERBACK EDITION 1981

NEL Books are published by
New English Library Limited,
Barnard's Inn, Holborn,
London EC1N 2JR.

Made and printed in Great Britain by
Hunt Barnard Printing Ltd.,
Aylesbury. Bucks.

0 450 05046 7

# HAWK
## THE SLAYER

# LEGEND OF THE MINDSWORD

There is a tale of a wondrous sword which, it is said, will be wielded by a hero of great valour each time the works of men are threatened with extinction by the forces of evil.

Cities and empires have long crumbled into the dust. Nothing is left of them but a memory which mourns for lost glory. But the legend of this sword has lingered in the myths and songs of men from age to age.

Some say it was forged in the bowels of a crooked mountain by Troll-Smiths, long dead, from a metal not of this earth, but from the fused ore of a lightning bolt let fall from the dying hand of a Sky King. Imbued with unearthly power, it needed the greatest magicians and sorcerers of that time to fashion their own thaumaturgical ornaments to control its potency.

From the secret Land of the Elvenfolk, a hilt that was the golden hand of their noblest suzerain clasped in its metalled fingers the last great elfin Mindstone, a crystalline brain orb whose incredible energy could only be sparked to life by a mind of like convolutions and accord.

So was it forged to become the mighty Mindsword; an invincible weapon, answerable only to the thought-command of one man and which could give him, some say, the Key to the Ancient Power.

Since the time of the War-To-End-All-Wars it has disappeared from man's ken and, so the legend goes, will only reappear when a Hero of Heroes comes to lead the Land out of the darkness.

This is the first part of the Saga of that sword.

# 1

## THE MINDSWORD

The silver moon slid westwards and hid its face momentarily from the scrabbling wind which thrust in from the North with sleet for fingernails. It dappled the silent forest in silver splashes, etching the tall pines against the sky.

A lone rider threaded through the moonlit wood, a shadow flickering from tree to tree bringing him closer to his goal. The man, who rode with great purpose, sat tall on his horse, was powerfully built and well over six feet. The upper half of his body was protected by a cuirass of black leather embossed with studs of brass. His night-coloured cloak-coat and leggings seemed to have been woven from fine-spun steel. A skull-fitting helmet of iron followed the contours of his head and forehead, with a peak spearing down to the ridge of his nose. But over the left eye and upper cheekbone a masking piece of close meshed steel had been fashioned to hide that side of his face.

Where the trees thinned, opening out on to a frost-flecked moorland, he dismounted causing a faint rustle where the pine needles were softly crunched under his iron-shod boots. There was a ghostly glint as a moonbeam glanced off the edge of his sword.

His movements were furtive.

He waited for a scudding cloud to obscure the moon, then slipped like a wraith from cover to cover. An assassin of the shadows, he reached his objective.

The High Keep.

It loomed above him, a crouching, craggy castle of grey stone. Fitful yellow and red flames of lamps and torches glittered from its mullioned windows. Its great courtyard doors were battened tight and all the other gates likewise, the man knew. The watchmen in the towers and the other vigilants within awaited the obvious assailant. It mattered little.

He knew the one weakness of the High Keep: the hidden entry in the rocky foundations of the Hall which gave access to the honeycomb of secret passages riddling the ancient stronghold. They were known only to a few and it was not surprising that he was one since he had been born within these walls and spent most of his life getting to know each stone.

His reason for being here was to kill, if need be, the Liege Lord of

the High Keep. He was his eldest son. His name was Voltan.

Raw shuddering gusts whipped the battlements and the grizzled-haired man shivered back into the shelter afforded by a turret.

Alaric, the Castellan of the High Keep, stared down at the road which came up to the Hall from the south. It was a beaten stretch of dirt leading into the trees.

He wished that the young master, Hawk, would come home soon. Word had been sent to him to return but the news which had come back was disquieting.

They lived in strange times, thought Alaric.

To think that not so long ago his Liege Lord's eldest son, Voltan, had also fought by his father's side in the Northern Rebellion. Now, there was a deadly enmity between the two brothers. They had both loved the same woman but she had chosen Hawk, the younger son. Since then Voltan had made his name a byword for terror and evil.

Alaric clicked his teeth in annoyance. Nettles of sleet lashed at his unprotected face. With a final examination of the south road, he moved to the small door and narrow staircase which reassured him of the warmth below. He passed along the Great Corridor, pausing to put his ear to the tight-shut studded doors of the Chamber of Gold. Only the Liege Lord of the High Keep could enter within its compass but occasionally the old Castellan had caught frustrating sight of its interior: the flash of beaten gold panels and the weird glow from somewhere beyond his vision.

For some days now, the old man, his Liege Lord, had spent an unconscionable amount of time in there. Why? There was no way for Alaric to surmise.

By straining his ears Alaric could just about hear the old man's breathing. It was tantalising to wonder what he was doing in there and also annoying, but he had other things to do with his time. Down the Long Staircase he checked that the guards were alert in their watch-places.

Voltan's bands of raiders had been seen in the vicinity of the Keep within the last few days and although the main entrance was well-battened and the postern gates were over a foot thick, it was a foolish Castellan who did not keep a vigilant eye on such details.

A sudden nagging thought tugged at his brain. He had almost overlooked one thing. An army of men certainly couldn't make much use of the Secret Way but one man with a purpose could.

Alaric hurried to the cellars. Lighting a flambeau, he descended below the level of the courtyard into the deep caves hewn from the

crag upon which the Keep sat.

The Secret Way had been carved in the rock as a final escape route if and when the Keep's defences were broken down. A past Lord of the Keep may have also had it in mind as a passage for food supplies during a long siege. That it existed was a reality which, Alaric reasoned, Voltan could conceivably know about.

He edged past the serried ranks of spiced ale barrels stored in the coolness against the heat of summer. His torch cast long shadows along the many cul-de-sacs; here a forgotten repository for broken hauberks, lances and billhooks; there mouldering leather harnesses gathered dampness from the walls.

Deep under the Keep was the resting place of prior tenants to the stronghold, the vaults of dead Lords, their wives and children.

The older Alaric got the more envious he became of the dead and he felt drawn to read the long list of names cut into the walls. This was his history, his antecedence just as much as his master's.

He came to the Niche of a Hundred Names and pondered on it. This had been the time of the Pestilence. Virulent and awful, whole families had been wiped from the face of the earth as if they had never existed. Death had stalked the Land for fifty years. As more and more people died, so the land became untilled and burgeoning fields of corn rotted, unharvested. Food became scarce and friend fought friend to survive.

Chaos had arrived. And had remained to this day, clucked Alaric.

Marauding bands of vicious men moved from one source of food to another like plagues of murdering locusts feeding on the subservience of the weak.

Then, insidiously, there were the first uneasy stirrings that the forces of evil were, in some way, being controlled. Subtly, the terrorization and murder became focused against those who still sought for a society of order and honour. No longer did the army of thieves, liars and killers act in a haphazard manner.

There were rumours of "Black Wizards". Creatures who lived in the darkness but no one had ever seen one of these "things" and who they were or where they had come from remained conjective, a mystery for the imaginative to unravel.

Was it possible that they had been born of the Pestilence, had been its cause even, and now controlled those who fought for the legions of Chaos?

Alaric's mind was in a turmoil. And the notion that Voltan, the eldest son of his Liege Lord, could somehow have become their willing pawn made his knuckles tighten whitely on the hilt of his sword.

A rat scuttled in a dirty puddle somewhere off to his left.

"Voltan! If my sword finds you down here," he mumbled to himself out of nervousness, "then your bones will have found a fine place to rot."

A large shadow moved at the corner of his eye. He heard the purr of a dagger sliding from a shiny sheath. Voltan? Here?

Alaric's lips opened in a cry that went unuttered. Gleaming steel poked through his bare throat, stained with crimson. Choking on his own blood Alaric looked oddly astonished as he clawed at the empty air, then fell down slowly to lie motionless on the slimy, cobbled floor.

Knee-high boots, black as night, nudged the fallen Castellan and a hand pulled the long dagger free. A dark pool widened slowly from the corpse's head and slivering threads found fissures in the stone to incarnadine.

Voltan replaced the dagger in its sheath.

Alaric's flambeau spluttered on the wet stone where it had fallen, flared and smoked the tiny flame into extinction.

As silently as Voltan had appeared, so did he now vanish into the tortuous corridors that latticed the aged building.

In the Chamber of Gold, the Lord of the High Keep stood impassively, waiting. Premonition of this hour tumbled through his mind.

The room was in the shape of a cross. Its walls were panelled in sheets of beaten, rough gold which glinted dully in the shafts of moonlight which spilled through the slitted windows high up on the walls. Here was the wealth of the Keep. With one exception, there was no other adornment on the walls. Somehow, the exception should have been an ornament of incredible value but instead it was a lacklustre sword whose only strangeness was the odd device it had for a pommel at the top of the hilt: a small, clenched fist made of brass.

Dominating the room, however, was a square well also fashioned in gold. It seemed to be filled to the brim with a green liquid which had a metallic sheen to it.

The Pool of Ishtar!

The Lord of the High Keep stared at it and drew in a sharp intake of breath, for the liquid in the well had lost its metallic burnish and now rippled oilily blood-red.

The hour was now upon him.

He knew the signification of the Pool's changing hue. His own life blood would stain it. Resignedly, he waited.

The secret door to the Chamber opened and Voltan was there. Swiftly he moved to the main doorway and barred the double doors

firmly. He looked intently at his father across the Well.

"Old man, you have lived too long. Now it is my turn."

The Lord of the Keep returned his son's stare with like intensity.

"You can strip the walls bare, Voltan." He spat out the words. "It will avail you naught."

"I didn't come for gold, my father," answered Voltan. "You know what I came for. Only you can tell me the secret. As a child I heard the rumours and tales and thought about the day when I, as your eldest son, would be made privy to the knowledge. I know it exists. But somehow, you are unable to use it. Why is that, old man?"

Wearily, his father cast around for a means of escape but Voltan effectively cut off any such route.

"The key to the Ancient Power was entrusted to our ancestors. I know that," stressed Voltan when his father did not reply. He gazed into the blood-red Pool of Ishtar. "Has it something to do with this well, old man? Is there an incantation I should know? What is this unknown thing, this enigma? Tell it me!"

Voltan's face blazed on the verge of madness.

In response, his father drew his short sword from his belt. "That I shall never divulge."

"Not to me. Is that it, my father?" he cried. His sword, which he had held couched on his breast, scythed in an arc and licked at his father's blade and sent a jolting pain through the old man's frame. "Not to me —but to that whelp, Hawk, you also sired. Yes, you would tell him. I can see it written in your eyes." Voltan's voice was seeped in bitterness. "All my life, it seems, I have been walking in the shadow of my brother, Hawk."

The Lord of the Keep warded off the first flaming blow but Voltan's savagery swept the short sword from his nerveless fingers and a cutting blow to the shoulder blade forced the old man to his knees.

"The secret, old man!" said Voltan urgently. His anger was still high. "Tell me and I shall let you live." He clutched at his father with his free hand. "It is my right as your eldest son. I demand the key to the Ancient Power."

The old man's voice was grey with the taste of defeat. "Voltan, you ceased being my son the day you spilt the blood of innocents. The Ancient Power must never fall into the hands of the Devil's agents."

For a trice, Voltan had a moment of indecision. Then, suddenly, there was a hammering at the door.

The Lord of the Keep's face lit with a pale glimmer of hope as he recognised the voice of Hawk.

"Father? Are you in there? Are you all right?" Hawk's voice was

hard with concern and he redoubled his efforts against the heavy oaken doors.

Voltan's sword arm moved quickly and his father uttered a sharp sigh of pain at the mortal blow. "Then let the secret die now," hissed Voltan as he retracted the blade.

"Voltan!" The Lord of the Keep was in great pain and each word caused him to grimace with effort. "I curse you this day to die a thousand deaths, and for your soul never to find peace."

Hawk's cries from beyond the door were becoming anguished but the door was beginning to splinter.

"Too late, little brother." Voltan sprang towards the hidden recess and was swallowed in the blackness as Hawk burst into the room.

Hawk was caught between the necessity of attending to his dying father and the desire to avenge the deed. But his father's drawn and white face forced him to postpone his pursuit of his brother and cradle the old man in his arms.

"The prophecy is fulfilled," his father gasped weakly. "The evil I spawned will now pollute the land …" He clutched at Hawk's arm as his son tightened his teeth in despair. "I have much to tell you and so little time, my son …"

His voice faltered but, somehow, he summoned up sufficient energy from the depths of his being. "Take the pouch from my neck."

Hawk did as he was bidden. The pouch had an ancient leathery feeling to it. Some heavy, stony substance lay within its folds.

"The great sword …"

The Lord of the Keep lay against the Well of Ishtar and now craned his head in the direction of the weapon. For a moment, Hawk was nonplussed until he followed the angle of his father's eyes. He strode over to the sword's resting place.

As he lowered it from off the wall he felt a strange, magnetic affinity with the great, two-handed sword. He noted the clenched fist pommel but was puzzled by the empty sockets on the hilt. What had they once held? Exotic jewels now lost in the aeons of unrecorded time?

"Place it between us." His father's rattling breaths forced the curious questions out of his mind and he quivered the sword into the floor before him. "Empty the pouch into your hand …"

A smooth, egg-sized stone, the colour of dull jade, slid into Hawk's hand.

"Look into the heart of the stone. Quickly! The coldness of death is in my limbs." His father's voice, weak though it was, held a ring of authority.

Hawk stared at the ordinary-looking stone. As if bewitched, some tiny nucleus deep within it began to glow and then pulse. Brighter and brighter it glowed until the whole egg was a pure energy of thrumming greenness. But the stone was still cold to the touch. No heat emanated from it but its light now filled the whole chamber.

The stone twitched with its own life-force and, with infinite slowness, floated free of Hawk's trembling hand.

It hung suspended in the air, its green glow casting devilish shadows on the faces of the two men underneath. Pulsing stronger than ever, it glided to hang, motionless, above the free-standing sword.

The hackles on the nape of Hawk's neck bristled as the metal fist on the pommel stiffly and jerkily unclenched and stretched up its brazen fingers to salute the orbstone. Now, the jade egg drifted down into the brass palm and the hand slowly closed to imprison the gleaming magic in its grasp.

Of a sudden, the green throbbing ended and the stone returned to its former, prosaic self, dull and lifeless.

"The last elfin mind-stone," whispered his father. "Think of the great sword in your hand and it will be so …"

His voice slipped as he remembered the day when his father had stood in this selfsame room and shown him the secret. And the dismay when he failed to strike life into the elfin mind-stone until his father had confided in him how seldom this had been accomplished. The Lord of the Keep's eyes clouded as he looked at his younger son. Pride mingled with awe as the realisation of what Hawk had effected flooded his mind.

"The mindsword is now yours, my son." A trickle of blood escaped from the corner of his dry lips. "The Ancient Power …"

But his voice now failed him and that awful strain on his energy finally gave way. A shudder racked him. His jaw slumped; he was dead.

Hawk removed his short, travelling cape and draped it over his father's head. He was drained of sorrow. Instead, a burning need for revenge filled his very being. He focused all this intensity on the great sword.

With an incredible immediacy, the mind-stone, held by the brass fist, incandesced and the mighty sword flew faster than any human eye could witness into his right hand.

It lay there like an extension of his self. He felt the blood in his veins race down his arm and by some strange osmosis, seem to course along the length of the blade. Dullness fled from the metal and a new

keenness sparked as if the sword had been magically honed.

He brandished it aloft.

“Voltan, I swear you will die by this sword.”

# 2

## THE ONE-HANDED MAN

The glittering sword sliced down like a butcher's cleaver. Ranulf flung up his left forearm to ward off the blow but its tremendous force jarred him backwards into a deep ditch.

His vision cartwheeled slowly. Tongues of fire speared up from blazing huts and shelters made of rude reeds and wattle to wash the night sky with a lambent glow.

The world was a nightmare of disconnected sounds and images. Screams of women and children were swallowed up in the gibberish bellows of blood-maddened looters. The flaming pyre they had made of the small village glinted dully on their rusty, iron caps and the scarred leather of their battle-jackets.

And then time itself fragmented.

Stabbing pain and burning. A delirium of agony and nausea, spiralling down into a darkness that made his belly heave.

Ranulf had no way of telling how long he had lain in the ditch. The sky had an orange cast from the fires which still burned. Acrid smoke tumbled over the bank.

The fingers of his left hand pushed futilely against the ooze at the bottom of the ditch until he realised that he no longer had a left hand. It had been severed at the wrist.

He retched violently. But even as his body shuddered, a part of his brain was stupidly wondering if he would ever find the missing member.

The sight of the fleshy stump made his gorge rise. He clumsily tore a clout from the tatters of his overshirt and bound the wound. It ached savagely and the ghost fingers felt as if molten liquid ran in their phantom veins.

A swift crashing of horses through the tall reeds warned him that he was still in danger. He dragged himself from the mud, up the low bank and crawled towards the shelter of a birchwood copse. The spiky furze tried to forbid his entry but Ranulf paid the thorns little heed as he blundered on.

Panting, he fell against the bole of a tree. As he leaned forward, the weight of the crossbow on his back swung heavily about his shoulders. He removed it from its harness and it lay mockingly at his feet.

It had all happened so fast. The night-riders had swept into the

village at dusk. Their leader had demanded that his men be fed. A giant of a man, he sat astride his destrier, his black cloak-coat wrapped about him like a bat's wings. There was the gleaming hint of a metal vest beneath and he held, couched against his breast, a drawn sword. His head was encased in a skull helmet and as his features moved out of its shadow, the left side of his face was concealed by a moulded steel mask which, somehow, seemed part of the living flesh.

The Elder of the village had been apologetic. Their grain store was nearly empty and they had barely enough corn to feed their chickens. "The soil is poor hereabouts, Lord," the Elder had reproached himself. "And our livestock few." A quaking house-carl had offered the little they had of rough-baked bread and had stood there for what seemed an eternity with arms outstretched, holding the oblation. Almost casually, the Dark One had made a quiet signal to one of his men.

The house-carl's head had bounded from his shoulders as the sword scythed through the air. The flopping trunk stayed upright, bread held aloft, for an awful moment.

"You and your kind will remember this day," the Dark One had hissed. "Henceforth, you will always see that there is food aplenty for my men. From now on, you will know my name."

Sanity had ceased. The raiders had become infected with a berserker rage.

Ranulf remembered now why the crossbow had stayed slung across his back. Why he had never fired a bolt.

With awful clarity he saw again in his mind's eye the white-haired Elder try to dodge the rearing hooves of the oncoming animal. His ineffectual rush to save him. The flash that arrested his attention and the sword slicing down and the grinning face in the gloom beyond.

Ranulf drew in a jumpy breath. He had panicked like some callow, unlicked pup. A man of his age. And experience. A veteran of six campaigns in the Northern Territory. He swallowed hard on the bitter bile. He hadn't even cocked the weapon.

A twig snapped. He whirled around and the sudden movement made the blood rush hotly to the severed wrist. His world spun sickeningly. The raider was alone and only twenty paces from where he stood.

Burly in his battle gear, his sword hung loosely by his side until he caught sight of the veteran. Piggy eyes flickered from deep-set eye sockets. Slowly, with stertorous breaths, he hefted the blade and moved forwards.

Ranulf fumbled with the crossbow. Always, it had been like a part of him. Each piece of it had been made by himself, fashioned in the long hours of campaigning. The scraping and polishing of the bone

shank; the fining of the cross-arm. And the unique mechanism which drew the string and loaded the short bolt from a clip into the firing groove. It was his. It had never failed him. It had responded to his touch eagerly.

But now it was a cumbersome weapon. A useless device which needed a man with two hands to control it.

With deliberate tread the attacker approached and raised his sword into a striking position. For a second time, Ranulf was facing death in the shape of sharpened steel.

But the raider's movements were strangely sluggish. He began to rock. His mouth opened but the voice was a wordless roar as he pitched forward on to the wet earth. Deep in his back was a rough-handled dagger.

At least one peasant had had some measure of revenge, thought Ranulf.

Reharnessing the crossbow to his back, Ranulf moved deeper into the wood. Each step taxed his strength. He was losing blood and his blurred vision made him stumble into objects which jarred pain along his injured arm. Often he would fall but some inner voice urged him to his feet and journey on.

Thankfully, the forest thinned and opened out into a natural amphitheatre. Dimly, he could discern the outlines of a large building and, almost blind, he staggered up the path towards the great double doors under the entrance porch.

The Monastery of Caddonbury was a stone-set, octagonal structure, thick-walled and buttressed to withstand the most powerful assault. Its eight, vaulted arches squared off into an elevated tower whose bell would only toll again when peace came to the Land. Here, the Sisterhood of the Holy Word prayed for salvation from chaos and gave sanctuary to those fleeing its adversaries. But it was a bitter truth that as the fugitives from evil increased; conversely there was a decrease in the number of quiet refuges.

Ranulf pounded on the massive doors. The echoes ebbed into a silence so deep that he slid down dejectedly on to his knees on the flagstones, thinking that the place was deserted. He suffered a long heartbeat of despair until, with tantalising slowness, the doors creaked open and the white face of a novice nun peered through.

"It's a man," she whispered superfluously to the companion who had now appeared beside her. "I think he's hurt," said the other.

Surprisingly strong hands raised and bore him into the soft-lit interior. Ranulf's consciousness kept lapsing into tiny black pools of nothingness.

He lay on a table and listened to the busy rustlings of homespun robes around him. Idly, he traced the arching line of a rafter to the high ceiling.

"Sister Monica, help me remove these rags," said a new voice. It held a note of authority but there was the gentle strength of age contained in it.

Eyelids flickering, he tried to focus as hands unwrapped the bloody clouts from around the stump of his injured arm.

A woman dressed in a wool-robe of rough woven grey stared down at him. Her linen wimple made a vignette of her face. She was much younger than he had guessed. There was a certain restless quality in her otherwise gentle features and her eyes mirrored no inner emotion. Rather, they had a cold, distant and impassive sheen to them—no doubt disconcerting to those she administered. She now swayed back, the skin tightening whitely on her face.

"God in Heaven! His hand!" she said faintly.

Hers had not been the first voice he had heard, Ranulf realised.

Sister Monica threw a hand to her mouth involuntarily. "Where are the fingers?"

"Left on some battle field with the rest of the hand," said the first voice, matter-of-factly.

The speaker's face danced at the edge of his vision. She was dressed sufficiently different from the other woman to suggest that this was the Abbess herself, although Ranulf had a very hazy idea of the hierarchical order of the Sisterhood of the Holy Word. Lines of patience were pencilled on her brow and her frank gaze gave her not only authority but paradoxically a surprised innocence.

"With the help of God and a sharp knife, we may yet save the rest of the arm from infection." The Abbess sighed deeply and turned to Sister Monica. "Now do pull yourself together," she ordered bluntly.

The last thing Ranulf remembered for quite some time was the icy touch of the knife.

It seemed to Ranulf that he slept a troubled sleep through one, long, endless night. Each brief awakening was to experience excruciating pain. Each agitated dream recalled the torment of his missing hand.

He struggled in his own private hell for four days until the agony abated and became a dull ache. The bitter irony was the sudden twinge of pain he felt every now and then in fingers which no longer existed.

The sisters clucked and brooded over him. Even the Abbess sat and fed him broth. All except the enigmatic Sister Monica. She managed to

remain aloof, ordering others to tend to his needs but never allowing herself to come into personal contact with him. Was it his maleness which made her keep her distance? Whatever it was, his presence in the Monastery somehow threatened her stable routine, her notion of cloistered life, her devotion to holy vows.

"Come, Master Ranulf, it is time for you to eat."

The Abbess broke in on his light dozing. She carried the plain wooden bowl over and sat by his pallet. A tiny window filtered grey daylight into the tiny cell he lay in.

He waited for her to spoon the nourishing liquid into his mouth as she always did and waited in vain.

"Come, Master Ranulf. Eat."

There was a twinkle in her eye and the veteran lay puzzled for a moment until he divined her intention. Awkwardly, but with great care, he cradled the bowl in the crook of his handless, left arm and supped with the right. He finished the soup without spilling a drop.

As the Abbess retrieved the bowl, she saw his eyes stray to the crossbow standing in the corner of the cell.

"Yes, Master Ranulf," she chided him. "You're thinking that if you can manage a bowl of soup, you can master the crossbow once more."

Ranulf made a weak denial.

"You were delirious for a long time," she reminded him. "And you spoke of many things. Terrible things. Now your arm has healed, no doubt your mind is full of revenge."

He tried to disclaim her remark but she gave him a knowing look. "What happened, my son?" she asked gently but firmly. "Talk it out loud. It will ease your bitterness."

Ranulf raised his freshly bandaged arm and looked at it. Quietly, he told her what had happened, trying to put into words the images which had been burned into his brain on that terrible night; of his grief for those who had been hacked down; of his undying hatred for those devils who laughed as they did the deed. And of his guilt for running away and saving his own neck. He was sobbing as he finished his account and the Abbess stroked his remaining hand.

"What sort of man would kill innocents?" she asked eventually.

Ranulf stared at the crossbow. He saw the face of the raiders' leader etched starkly on the whitewashed wall. A wolf's head cased in iron, the menace of the hidden eye-socket and cheekbone. The susurrant voice of a snake.

"You and your kind will remember this day," said the death's head image in Ranulf's mind. "From now on, you will know my name."

He turned to look at the questioning face of the Abbess.

“His name is Voltan, the Dark One.”

# 3

## VOLTAN, THE DARK ONE

A bank of black storm clouds settled over the forest and chilled the air with the fine tang of a mountain climate, momentarily silencing the minute scuttlings and scurryings of small creatures. The greenness of the underwood darkened with a deeper viridescence and quickening wisps of mist-haze coiled and uncoiled through the briars as the temperature dropped.

Across the tree-topped horizon, a bolt of lightning zigzagged from a leaden sky. Caught for an instant in the glare was a man in black, cloak-coat flying in the wind which had suddenly whipped up from nowhere. Thunder followed quickly, grumbling and deep.

Voltan stabbed his sword at the heavens, haloed by the increasing storm.

"Wizard!" he screamed above the thundersquall. "Help me, Wizard. Remember our bargain. You promised all in return for my swordarm."

Voltan began to revolve his head slowly as if assailed by some inner pain. A keening wail issued from his lips as, by degrees, he slumped to a kneeling position, fumbling with his free hand to remove the iron helmet which now seemed to be like a torturing band of metal around his head.

The mouth of a cave yawned before him, a black gaping hole in the massive limestone scarp which upthrust from the forested bedrock. A pulsing red phosphorescence glimmered in the opening, beckoning him to enter. Stumbling, he passed through a fine mist which danced in the entrance. The darkness of not-being blinded Voltan for an instant before his sight was restored.

He edged past oozing stalagmites which guarded the way in like dirty teeth. At the dim end of the cave was a smooth wall, spherical, formed from a thrumming, scarlet substance which seemed to lack solidity as it rippled and shifted but always retained an ovoid shape. The cave sloped upwards to fuse into it. Voltan kneeled before it.

As his vision cleared, he watched as a hooded figure appeared from the darkness—a tall, spidery creature cloaked in a flowing mantle of black and gold. Deep within the hood of its cowled head there blazed twin orbs where eyes should have been and in the amber glow a darkened green chitinous face revealed itself in high relief. Claw-like hands on which only three bony fingers could be seen, poked out from

the folds of its robe, talons for fingernails which luminesced as the hand moved.

"The pain! It gets worse. Each time it gets worse." The whispered words jerked from Voltan's tortured throat. "Surely your power can cure this torment."

He had removed the steel mask from his face and, moaning, he raised his head piteously to face the hooded figure. Where once an eye had been was a blackened socket and the skin on the upper cheekbone was flaking, oozing and festering.

The Wizard did not speak but withdrew a dark, opaline crystal from the depths of his robe. Multi-faceted, it had the shape of a cone and the hooded figure carefully aimed the sharp apex at the exposed face. Fire boiled in the crystal and there lanced from the pyramidal point a stabbing flash of energy which flared over the putrid flesh. There was no heat in the welding flame as it blazed for one brief instant but the scream that was wrenched from Voltan's lips was horror-riven. He writhed on the floor and then was quiet.

"Kinsman Voltan," said the Wizard, and its voice had the dry, stridulant quality of an insect. "Your broken face will not pain you for a while. But you will need the use of the crystal again."

Voltan fingered the mutilated flesh on his face with an explorative touch. It was no longer weeping with open sores but had a glazed, moulded feeling to it. Yet he knew it had a loathsome aspect and the knowledge made his body tighten with a hate he could taste. He re-donned the iron helm and pulled himself up on his feet. Splay-legged and strong again, he faced the mantled figure.

"The Land is almost ours," rasped the Wizard. "But there is one who stands between us and the final victory. The one who is your brother. Hawk!"

Hawk. Always Hawk.

A trap would have to be laid. Something so simple that not even his prudent, younger brother would suspect it. The ideas which flitted through his mind came so naturally that when the realisation flooded over him that they were being put there by this creature in some wordless, soundless way, he had a moment of revulsion for being manipulated so easily. He remembered the first time the Wizard had shown this facility for implanting thoughts in his mind and how he had felt unclean and screamed his rage. But that had been before the promise.

The orb-eyes gleamed brightly in the depths of the hood. "You will prepare a way for his death," it concluded.

It was part statement, part question, and Voltan already knew the answer.

He withdrew from the glowing red, no longer a pained animal but vibrant, vengeful. A sudden, deafening rush and he was once more in the quiet glade.

"Now my time for revenge begins, brother," he whispered to the listening wild wood.

A dozen candles burned their tiny spears of flame on the cross members of oaken beams suspended high up in the rafters of the monastery. There floated up from below the soft chant of the sisters at their evening prayers mixed with the solitary voice of the Abbess as she read from a parchment tome resting on a lectern.

"And though we are beset by many terrors, we pray for the deliverance of the Land," she intoned. "Blest be the Land," echoed the kneeling nuns. "Free from the dangers of greed," continued the Lady Abbess, "and the manifold cruelties of dark hate."

The litany droned on and the sisters were oblivious of the stealthy rustling of soft-footed men who moved through the dense mist towards the dimly lit church.

"We pray for compassion and caring; for the love that is freely given and joyfully received."

The words were indistinct beyond the thick walls of the monastery and would have fallen on closed ears had the furtive figures who sifted through the thinning trees been listening.

The men reached the cover of the walls and inched past a buttress, their objective the huge double doors of the entrance.

"Blessed is the Word and doubly blessed are the true servants of the Word."

The Abbess closed the heavy book.

"Blest be—" began the nuns as the two unbarred wooden doors exploded open. They slammed against the interior walls with a reverberating whump which sent the nuns scrambling with shock. Tendrils of mist curled along the flagstones and clung to the black leather of boots standing there.

The Abbess looked evenly at the handful of men who formed a rough bodyguard around a giant of a warrior. Her eyes weighed each one as they stood there with a truculent authority, swords swinging menacingly.

"This is a house of God," she challenged. "Your weapons have no place here."

The leader moved slowly from the doorway, descended the three steps down into the well of the building and smiled thinly at the fearless woman.

“I am told, woman,” he said in a low voice, “that your church holds you in high esteem.”

The statement disconcerted the Abbess for a moment.

“I am but a humble servant of God like my sisters here beside me,” she protested. “We are here solely to assist those who most need our help.”

A tall, fair youth moved forward, pushing a sobbing and cowering novice out of his way.

“We would like *you* to give *us* your help, old woman.”

He spoke insolently, hoping to elicit the unguarded phrase of anger which would allow him to use unbridled force. But the Abbess recognised his naïve aggression and stifled the remark she would have dearly loved to make.

“My son, Drogo, speaks true,” said Voltan. “What is your answer?”

“How can I help you?” the Abbess asked. “What do you want?”

Sister Monica, her face flickering as she tried to swallow her fear, edged closer to her superior as if to derive some strength from her.

“I, Voltan, want you, old woman.”

At the sound of the name, several nuns withdrew into the shadow of the arched cloister which ringed the inside of the church. There were sharp intakes of breath which hissed into a deepening silence. The Abbess herself shuddered visibly. “I know your name,” she uttered faintly: “Killer of women and children, you are a servant of evil. But in this church we have no fear of you.”

“I am pleased that you know of me,” smiled Voltan. “It will make my task that much easier.”

He turned to his son as if tired of playing out a charade. “Take her!”

Drogo grinned, his eyelids drooping sleepily, then, suddenly, like a coiled spring, he flung a back-handed blow at Sister Monica which sent her reeling into the heavy lectern. He seized the Abbess by the thick robe on her upper arm and prepared to drag her back out the door.

“Let her go!”

The hard voice made all of the intruders spin in surprise to face the direction of the speaker.

Ranulf stood resolutely by a small side door, a cocked crossbow resting on his bandaged arm. It was levelled at Drogo.

“I said let her go,” repeated Ranulf harshly.

The men had formed a frozen tableau of indecision. Then a movement too fast to be seen emanated from Voltan and a streaking dagger plunged into Ranulf’s right shoulder to send the crossbow

crashing from his paralysed hand. As he staggered and fell, one of Voltan's men raised his sword ominously as if he would end the veteran's life.

"Leave him!" thundered Voltan. And then, as a casual afterthought; "He will live to serve my purpose."

"Our lady is needed here." It was a piteous cry from Sister Monica. She struggled to get to her knees. "Why do you take her from us?" she pleaded.

Voltan studied her in silence, then crossed in front of her to stand before a small altar table which bore the few reliquaries the church possessed.

"For the gold that lies in the fat coffers of your Holy Fortress," he declared in an almost affable manner. "Go, tell them that two thousand pieces of gold will buy her freedom. I shall return when next the moon is full." Pointedly he paused. "The gold had best be here."

Suddenly his manner and voice hardened.

"If not—"

His sword blasted the religious objects from the altar table with a ferocity which the terrified nuns felt like an icy wind. Prompted by his father's action, Drogo brought the steel tip of his own blade under the chin of the Abbess hoping for a resultant recoil of fear. She thwarted him. Her eyes never blinked but stared fearlessly back at him. Hiding his disappointment, he sullenly dragged her from the church as Voltan ushered the rest of his men from the monastery.

Luckily for Ranulf, the dagger had not penetrated too deeply through his thick wool vest and even then it was in a fleshy part of his shoulder. Still in shock, Sister Monica staunched what little blood there was and applied some soft wadding to the wound.

"You are a warrior. What are we to do?"

Her question surprised him since she had given him the impression that he did not exist in her orderly world.

"Pay the ransom," he answered a little weakly.

Even as he said it he realised that it might have sounded cruel and flippant, but the sister treated it as a straight statement.

"No, it is not possible," she demurred. "The Church has decreed that no ransom will ever be paid for any of its order."

She helped him arrange his wool shift. "What happens is the will of God," she said as a matter of fact.

"Will of God!" The phrase reddened his forehead with irritation. "I know this man!" he cried. "I have seen what he can do." He shook his head at the sister's naïvety. "He will take pleasure in your lady's death."

“God help me! I know not what to do!”

Sister Monica pushed her clenched hands to her mouth. The prayers were tumbling through her brain. Guidance. God would talk to her and tell her what to do. Her entire upbringing in the service of the Church left her in no doubt that the Word would manifest itself.

“You saved my arm and skull face must pay for the death of my village.” Ranulf was feeling slightly guilty. He looked at the woman and saw how vulnerable she was in her new, enforced position as leader of the sisterhood. His words to her had all been disparaging and callous. “Somehow, I will get help,” he said in as kind a manner as possible, but it still came out sounding gruff.

However, Sister Monica had been abstracted by her own musings and was unmindful of Ranulf’s self-reproach.

“You must go to the Holy Fortress at Danesford and speak to the High Abbot himself,” she said decisively. “Ask *him* what we must do!”

# 4

## THE HOLY FORTRESS

For five days Ranulf had travelled uneventfully through the high, upland forests and across the moors which lay scattered between the pines and spruce, always going north to the foot of the Iron Hills. He slept cold at nights, fearful that a fire would bring an unwanted visitor or predator, and kept a vigilant watch as he rode slowly but steadily among the foothills towards the shire of Danesford.

It took a day to cross the marshland of Cadoc, an area both vast and, for the most part, trackless and unexplored. Fortunately, Ranulf had first hand experience of this region and needed little recourse to his dog-eared maps for guidance. An old warrior such as he kept an observant eye on the routes he had to march on military expeditions and the like. Always know your line of retreat, he had been advised by grizzled and aged campaigners. And so he pigeon-holed little but important details like the odd-shaped hill or the solitary, stunted tree; a dip or a hollow; a patch of water. Always know where you are and you'll escape with your skin intact, had been the prime law of the surviving soldier in the field.

To the south, as far as the eye could see, was a dark, forbidding forest, thick and seemingly impenetrable. It stretched from the base of the Iron Hills almost to the shores of the Great Lake, a barrier to the ordinary traveller. Ranulf only knew of the tales told by veterans pickled in spiced ale. In its denseness, hidden dangers lurked; strange beasts and mutations unknown to man and, others hinted darkly, much, much worse. Whether the stories were true or not, Ranulf had no intention of testing their veracity even though it would have cut his journeying time by half. No! The wayfarer was wise to give the Forest of Weir a wide berth.

Between him and the Holy Fortress to the west, lay a desolate tract known as the Broken Lands. No creature lived there. Wreaths of oily smoke spiralled up from cracks cleft in the clay-earth which was scarred with running fissures. Pools of metallic slime bubbled and stank the air with the burning stench of sulphur.

He had little choice. This wasted land had to be crossed and Ranulf prepared himself for the ordeal. His horse drank deeply from a sweetwater spring and, as he chewed on some dry biscuit, he mulled ruefully over all that had befallen him in the past few days to bring him to this God-forsaken part of the Land. He shook his head in

wonderment at himself. During all the time he had been a campaigner, he had never ever been a volunteer for anything and here he was on a perilous mission at a time in his life when he should have had a warm corner by the fire with a companion to share in his memories.

His horse whinnied and, with a sigh, he tightened the girths of its saddle, swung himself up on to its broad back and spurred it across the smoke-filled, barren land.

The poisoned air cleared gradually as he climbed from the fractured mud-basin up a rocky incline. Jagged sandstone cliffs reared on either side of the boulder-strewn pathway and the wind blew a chill through his metal-ringed surcoat. He dug out a shaggy pelisse from his pack and pulled it tightly about his shoulders for warmth, bending his head down to the mane of his horse to avoid the worst of the blast. The ravine gave way to a sheer precipice to which the track clung and ascended, leaving the valley far below. Ranulf dismounted, shouldered his pack to lighten the horse's load and began the steep trudge towards his goal.

The Holy Fortress was built on the rugged outcrop of the escarpment, commanding a view of the narrow route which led up to it and the deep gorge which flanked the length of the stony bluff Ranulf crossed. Exhausted, he approached it, pulling a heavily-lathered horse behind him until the Fortress towered gigantic before him.

It seemed to grow organically from its granite foundations so that its battlement walls were fashioned from the rock itself and perched on top were the cloistered halls and towers of the building. The Holy Fortress was seemingly impregnable and had withstood the changing centuries, solid and aloof, a place of solitude, a small island of peace in a dark and inhospitable world.

The High Abbot had been kept informed of the lone rider's approach by the high tower watchman and an acolyte eventually apprised him of the stranger's identity and whence he came. While Ranulf fed his hunger and rested, the holy man stared out through the narrow window at the setting sun which suffused the far side of the valley with splashes of blood red.

Night fell.

For a long time he remained in semi-darkness until Brother Peter lit the sparsely-furnished room with a candle and ushered Ranulf in at the same time. He greeted the old warrior and waved him into a plain wooden chair by the blazing fire.

"I hope our meagre fare sufficed, my son," he apologised. "Times are hard since the wars."

Ranulf felt slightly ill at ease in the Abbot's presence. He was always this way with those he immediately classed as his superiors, clumsy and awkward.

"The food was good and the rest much needed, Holy Father," he replied in what he hoped was a suitably reverent voice.

The High Abbot smiled. He could understand Ranulf's discomfiture. After all, he had once been a warrior himself. The Brotherhood of the Word had been founded on a core of fighting men who, although saintly, could still wield a sword when the forces of evil threatened. But nowadays, it was different. The order had shrunk and the swash-buckling fathers of the past were now getting too old to bear arms and their only weapon against the legions of the night was prayer. Hair grew thin and white, mused the Abbot, bones creaked a little more with each first flurry of winter snow and the weakening flesh needed an extra log in the hearth.

"You bear a message from our sisters at Caddonbury," he prompted.

"I do. From Sister Monica," said Ranulf, thankful to tell his tale. "She needs your help and counsel. Five days ago the church was defiled by a band of raiders!"

The High Abbot's eyes narrowed and his manner became more attentive.

"The same filth that attacked and burnt my own village," Ranulf continued. "They are led by a skull-masked monster called Voltan …"

"We have heard of this man. Continue …"

"He has taken the Lady Abbess hostage and will return her at the next full moon. The price to be paid is two thousand gold pieces or she will be killed."

With a deep sigh, the Abbot stood up and rubbed his veined hands against the cold which seeped through the stone walls. Unbidden tears welled in his rheumy eyes and when he spoke, his voice trembled slightly but gained strength as he progressed.

"Since the war, the power of evil has spread like a pestilence across the Land. We of the Order strive against it by making our churches sanctuaries for the sick and poor. We have no defence to offer against those who would march against us; the looters and others of the devil's cohorts. If we pay the ransom for just one of our Order, then all of us will be at risk."

Ranulf was a simple man and his ingenuousness made him argumentative.

"This I understand," he remonstrated. "But the Lady Abbess is irreplaceable, surely?"

"That is true," said the High Abbot softly. "Many believe that the

good lady has been touched by the hand of God. It was of her own choosing that she went from the safety of the fortress to tend to the people of Caddonbury."

"It would be one more victory to the powers of darkness if she were no longer among us," insisted the veteran.

The High Abbot sat down wearily and steepled his fingers, tapping them against his lower lip.

"There is *one* who has helped us before!" he murmured after some thought. "A warrior who has fought on the side of light during these dark years. If he can be found he may help us."

He leaned over and searched for something in a brass coffer standing on a chest by his chair.

"News reached us of his passing through the Northern Districts several days ago."

He uttered a small sound of triumph as his fingers found a brass-wrought medallion.

"If you find him, give him this," he bade Ranulf. "He will know that his help is needed."

Ranulf studied the coin curiously before tucking it into his belt pouch.

"By what name is this warrior called?" he asked.

The High Abbot looked at him with a proud eye.

"Hawk!" he said simply.

# 5

## HAWK

The damp air in the forest was stirred by a light breeze as the lone horseman snaked his way past the peeling silver birches, deeper and deeper into the wood.

Hawk was a tall, finely-built man with a handsome, stone-chiselled face. His dark hair, which fell to the nape of his neck, was wet with the mist which pervaded the forest like mourning wraiths clinging and sliding from tree to tree.

A vest of chain-mail was the only armour he wore, but his arms were unprotected and clothed in a saffron undertunic which hung loosely about them. His riding breeches hugged his legs and were fashioned out of dark chestnut-coloured cordovan tucked into knee-high leather boots. Slung across his back was the great mindsword, its pommel-fist thrust defiantly into the air.

Strange odours assailed him as he skirted a swamp of muddy waste from which tall reeds and strange, giant docks grew. A gaseous milkiness covered the puddled ooze and from some mandrake roots there came a strong hissing as if from some monstrous reptile.

Hawk could feel the night-coloured horse's fear of this boggy place and gentled him until they passed it by and were back amid the tall firs.

A woman's scream cut through the gloomy forest with an abruptness which made his horse rear. Hawk tried to pierce the curtain of deeply-shaded trees but could see nothing. Warily, he edged his horse towards the source of the cry.

In a small clearing, a figure, clad in rags, stood arms outstretched, tied between two trees. Brushwood was piled around her feet and she hung there moaning piteously.

Hawk could not see her face as it was muffled entirely by a hood of the same rough weave as the rest of her tattered clothes.

A brute with a livid scar running the length of his face teased her with a firebrand and his grating laughter showed he thought it great sport. As did his companion, who sat astride a horse watching the entertainment. Each scream from the bound woman elicited more raucous yells from the two louts.

"Why do you treat the woman this way?" asked Hawk. His voice was dangerously low, almost casual, but there was a hint of steel

strength behind it.

The woman's tormentor swung round to face him, the burning torch leaving a swathe of smoke in its passing. His fellow lout stiffened and readied his bow.

"If it's any business of yours," said Scar sneeringly, "She's a witch." He broke off to stab out at his captive with the flame. "And was caught practising her foul arts on one of my fine hogs."

Hawk leaned forward in his saddle and looked in the direction of the roped figure. "Does he speak the truth, woman?"

The huddled bundle of rags swayed wearily. "I sought only to cure the animal of its ills," she gasped.

"She lies," bellowed Scar. "The pig died an hour after she touched it with that devil stick."

He waved at a strangely carved staff.

"Had you let me tend it, the creature would have lived," wailed the woman.

"Enough of your foul chatter," snarled Scar. "This will put an end to it."

He began to thrust the torch at the brushwood.

"No!" Hawk cracked out the word as he swung down from the horse and its hardness stopped Scar's movement. The churl on horseback slipped an arrow from his quiver and notched it but the furtive gesture had already been noted by Hawk.

Scar waggled the firebrand, a crafty delight spreading across his evil face. "Well, old witch," he gloated. "It seems you will have company when you burn." With feigned coolness he signalled to his companion. "Kill him."

The archer raised his bow to take aim, disconcerted that the stranger appeared to be taking no evasive action. The string twanged and the arrow rushed towards its mark.

Hawk flung up an arm as if to ward off the speeding shaft. His brain visualised the mindsword in his hand and instantly the mighty weapon was there to act as a shield. The arrow glanced off harmlessly and the mindstone, which had flared green, dimmed to normal.

The event was too much for the bowman; he wheeled his horse and galloped off into the thick underbrush leaving Scar mouthing obscenities after him.

Still cursing he turned to face Hawk.

"He may run like a dog, but not I," he grunted.

"Go in peace with your friend," said Hawk. He had no desire to fight this man and he spoke without aggression.

“Or else?” Scar challenged sarcastically, throwing to one side the lighted torch. “Or else what, my fine friend?”

He stood straddle-legged, assessing Hawk. His fingers moved slowly to his sword and tapped the butt nervously, all the while grinning confidently. Hawk’s face showed no expression. His eyes had tightened at the implicit threat in Scar’s bearing and now he waited for the other man to make his decision.

Sweat trickled down Scar’s wrist and crawled through the dirt and hair on the back of his hand. The oily itch forced the choice on him. Irritated, he pulled his sword from its scabbard and, roaring like a bull, he charged at Hawk, scything with the blade. The razor-sharp steel whistled past Hawk’s shoulder as he gave a little sidestep and sent his opponent sprawling beyond him.

Scar, confused by the other man’s agility and speed, had a moment of uncertainty but the sight of Hawk leaning on his sword hilt made his rage rise again to choke him.

“Use your sword, pig,” he spat. “Do you mock me! The time of playing games is *over!”*

He lunged in once more but this time Hawk parried the blow and with a twist, spun Scar’s sword out of his sweaty grip to land in the dirt. Hawk brought his blade close under Scar’s chin, making the man’s nostrils flare with fear.

“Go in peace, brother,” said Hawk, and gave his adversary a long, hard look before turning his back on him to go to the aid of the woman.

Scar’s eyes dilated with hate. His innards churned and a hot flux surged through his stomach. He thought of the way he had been dismissed by Hawk and his close escape from death was already forgotten. He bent down, grasped his fallen weapon and flashed out at Hawk’s unprotected back.

The woman screamed a warning and Hawk whirled, his sword gleaming death as it sliced through Scar’s leather jerkin and slashed his upper abdomen to cleave his vitals. Scar tottered aimlessly and then his ponderous bulk crashed to the ground.

Hawk cut the woman’s bonds and she collapsed into his arms.

“My cave is there—in the woods.” Her voice was barely a whisper and sounded centuries old until Hawk was able to see what lay within the hood. Her face was white with an albino-like pallor but young and smooth. A circlet of doeskin covered her eyes, plain but for a rude painted image of an eye in the centre. “First, hand me my staff,” she asked of him.

The woman tended to the fire and eked more warmth from it to dispel the icy dankness in the cave. Neither of them had spoken since they left the clearing.

"By what name are you called, Lord?" she queried in her peculiar, aged voice.

When Hawk responded with his name, she nodded as if she already knew the answer before he replied. "Many times have I heard it spoken," she said. "You fight for good."

"It is the way I have chosen," Hawk answered simply.

The woman ladled some liquid into a wooden bowl and offered it to him. It was a light broth of some kind but as Hawk supped, it seemed to charge his inner self with a warmth which coursed the length of his body, reinvigorating him.

"I am called Meena." She gave a self-deprecatory laugh. "Most times I am known as Meena the Madwoman. Or just plain witch, as you heard today. But I mean no harm. Sometimes I long to be able to tell them—"

Meena broke off so abruptly it was as if her words had been stopped by some external agency and Hawk frowned, believing she had heard something outside that was beyond his perception. But all he could hear was the monotonous drip of seeping waterdrops somewhere deep within the cave.

"I come from the land of Ilayet," continued Meena after her strange pause. "Sometimes a child would be born there who was different from the other children. My people knew that such a child had the Sign of the Guardian marked upon them. I was such a child. Blind of sight but all-seeing in mind. Therefore I was taught the secrets of each element; to be a healer; to tend not only those whose ills were of the flesh but also those assailed in spirit by the devil's kin. To help and to warn. But this was long ago and the land of Ilayet is now a waterless waste. This much I am permitted to tell you, Lord Hawk."

"Permitted? I don't understand."

"I have the Sign of the Guardian. I cannot explain my being to you further as I would endanger the trust given to me as a bearer of the Sign."

Hawk was confused by the explanation. Was it possible that she was exactly what she had confessed to being—a madwoman?

"You saved my life today and I am in your debt," Meena said thankfully. "How can I repay you?"

"I need no payment."

Hawk made a move to rise but the woman bade him stay.

"Wait," she said. "Let me look into the fire. It shows these dead eyes

many things."

From a pouch around her waist, she took a small vial and scattered a pinch of the powder contents into the fire. An amber radiance filled the cave and Meena stared sightlessly at the effulgence.

Hawk shaded his eyes from the strong light which etched his and the woman's shadows blackly on the walls and ceiling of the cave. Quartz crystals in the rock glinted with scintillating stars and suddenly the brilliance died to a fireglow.

"A one-handed man seeks you," Meena said haltingly, explaining the images which were jumbled in her brain. "He carries a token. But I also see a man who wears a mask of death."

Hawk's jaw clenched involuntarily.

"Beware of this man. He is filled with hate."

"Voltan!" The name whispered from his tight lips. He looked at the woman afresh. Madwoman or not, she seemed to have the gift of prophecy. "Where do I find this one-handed man?"

"Go south," she replied and then, agitatedly, "Quickly, for he rides into danger. Ranulf is his name."

Hawk rose to his feet. "Is there more you can tell me?" he asked.

The woman shook her head. "The future cannot be altered," she replied. "Therefore the fabric of what is to happen can only be seen dimly. But I do know that you will have need of me again, Lord Hawk. The final battle has yet to be fought."

She directed her gaze at him and the painted eye on the leather band stared intently. "Remember," she finished quietly, "I shall be here when you need me."

Hawk turned to look back at her from the mouth of the cave.

"Take care," he said, and was gone.

Meena looked sightlessly after him and then threw another pinch of powder on the fire. Images rushed at her. Bodyless voices and the scents and smells of a confused universe. Easily, she shut out the unwanted chaos and concentrated on the visions she required.

Smoke billowed over a yellowed grassland and a rider, Hawk, galloped across an endless plain, an apparition which appeared and disappeared in the miasmic haze.

"The road ahead is filled with death," she breathed to herself. "But I shall be watching. Ride fast. The one-handed man will need your help."

# 6

## ENCOUNTER WITH THE AXE MEN

Ranulf slowed his horse to a walk. An uneasy feeling had grumbled at the pit of his stomach ever since he had ridden along this forest path. The prickly sensation that he was being watched tingled his every nerve and so he rode, his loaded crossbow tucked in front of the saddle.

The two men materialised on the track a little way ahead from opposite sides of the wood and Ranulf steadied his horse to a halt. Automatically he couched his bow. The taller of the two men spoke first.

"No, friend, that is not necessary," grinned the man.

He and his comrade were dressed alike in the silver and black attire of the upland foresters and Ranulf quickly spotted the tiny axes which hung in holsters on their hips. The veteran drew in a deep breath. It had been a long time since the upland foresters had taken axe to tree. Nowadays they were known as freebooters and cutpurses, smilers with honed hammers under their cloaks. But these two didn't seem to mind swaggering in the open.

"We are travellers," confided the second man. "And would ask you in what direction the village of Burnby lies."

Both men had no trace of the upland dialect in their voices and for a moment Ranulf felt he may have made a mistake and that they were of some outlandish gentry who dressed in similar fashion to the foresters when, out of the corner of his eye, he detected a slight stir in the branches of a tree to his right. There was a dull glint of metal and Ranulf spun and fired in one fluid motion.

The bolt burrowed into the chest of a third man who fell from the crook of a gnarled oak, his axe frozen in the act of being thrown. But before Ranulf could whip back to the other men, a hard object slammed viciously against the side of his head. Blackness irised in to a fine point of screaming light as he fell unconscious from the horse.

He felt fingers ferret about his body and find the small pouch tucked behind his breeches belt. When he tried to move, he was unable to because of the tight cords binding him to the branchless trunk of a spruce. The pain in his head threatened to blank him out again as he tried to open his eyes but he persevered to prise the lids apart.

"To have killed our friend was a very bad mistake," hissed the first

man, squeezing Ranulf's face.

"A mistake that is going to cost you more than these few paltry coins," agreed the second man, delivering a blow to the old warrior's belly.

"Your friend … was about … to cleave me with his axe," wheezed Ranulf.

The first man snapped his grip from Ranulf's face causing him to jerk back in pain. He looked at his dead companion, a sour expression on his face. "Malrid was always a clumsy man," he said. "But it will be a nuisance having to replace him." He looked at his friend for guidance. "What punishment, then, is fitting for this one-handed murderer?"

The second man pondered the question. "Something different," he mused. "It's been a dull day."

"I am no murderer," gritted Ranulf. "I merely protected myself."

Like a pouncing cat, the taller man slapped Ranulf ferociously across the face. "Silence, scum," he howled.

The second man snapped his fingers, his countenance brightening. "A contest!"

He jerked his short, throwing axe from its sheath-clip and flipped it at Ranulf. It thudded into the tree several inches from the veteran's scalp.

"Perfect," drawled the first man, rubbing his hands together to get them dry. "I wager two silver pieces that I can get closer—without drawing blood." Then, as an afterthought. "Winner gets to finish him off."

"Done!" laughed his comrade, retrieving his axe. "First throw to you."

The tall man stood facing Ranulf at a distance of twenty paces, his hands dangling by his side. He shook them a few times, clenched them, then straightened out his fingers fully. A swift motion and his axe leapt from its holster to bite deep into the wood about two inches from Ranulf's ear.

"A good throw in the circumstances," said the second man disparagingly. "But—!"

He assumed the same stance although his flexing mannerisms were different. His hand darted to the handle of the axe which slid from its clip below his belt and he flicked it at Ranulf.

His axe slammed into the tree between Ranulf's head and the other axe so that the two handles smacked together like the crack of doom.

The two men studied the hits, then resheathed their axes before moving back to their throwing positions.

“The first two silver pieces are mine,” gloated the winner.

“Again!” snarled the first man. “But this time the wager is for the man who cuts our assassin’s ears off cleanly from his head.”

“Cut him down!” said a soft voice which made both men jerk around in astonishment.

Hawk stood before them, the mindsword still sheathed on his back.

The two men gave each other a knowing look and then moved a distance apart to face this apparent madman.

“It is you that will be cut down,” said the first man.

“The contest gets better,” laughed his friend.

Hawk snapped his eyes from one man to the other, watching the way their hands hung down over the axe-sheaths. Each minute finger flexion was observed.

The first man poked a wet tongue along his drying lips and the second man was uncomfortably aware of a bead of sweat rolling down his forehead. The madman who faced them was only one man after all but it was the way he stood there, impassive like a block of stone and not even making the slightest move to unsheath the strange sword resting on his back. The first man cast a sidelong glance at his comrade. Now! The glance said. Throw now!

Simultaneously, the two men went for their axes. The mindstone pulsed green on the pommel of Hawk’s sword and there it was in his hand. Everything seemed to happen in slow time.

The second man’s axe was barely clear of its holster-clip when Hawk’s massive two-handed sword, still pulsating, plunged through his chest, lifted him bodily off his feet and speared him into the bole of a tree six paces back.

Cartwheeling through the air glistened the axe of the first man. In a blur of speed, Hawk plucked it out of the air, swung it in an arc back at the hapless thrower.

The first man stared in utter disbelief. He heard it cleave through his rib cage like the snapping of wet twigs, the awful thump as it ploughed inwards. He felt nothing as he somersaulted back to lie spreadeagled, eyes glazed open, already dead.

Hawk cut Ranulf free. The warrior’s eyes were still frozen, wide-open at what had happened.

“What manner of man are you?” he asked haltingly. “Never before have I seen—”

“I am called Hawk.”

A look of astonishment covered Ranulf’s face and then the irony of the situation had him laughing wildly. The man he had searched for so fruitlessly these last few days, and just when he thought that his life

was forfeit, up he popped.

Hawk looked at him with an amused perplexity.

“I’m sorry, Lord,” Ranulf excused himself. “It’s just funny that after all my searching …” He waved an apologetic hand, went over to the corpse of the first man, found what he wanted and said by way of explanation, “I have this for you.”

He handed the High Abbot’s medallion to Hawk, was distracted by a sudden thought and fumbled again in the pouches of his erstwhile executioners. There was a jingle of coins as he recovered what had been taken from him.

“You are from the fortress?” asked Hawk.

“Yes!” said Ranulf. “I have been looking for you for many days.” He retrieved his horse and checked its harness. “You are needed.”

# 7

## THE TAVERN

"Chak!" roared Voltan. "Ride by my side."

The trail was narrow and Voltan's liegeman, Chak, had to squeeze his animal tightly against the thick leafy bushes and trees which bounded their route on either side.

He had ridden with Voltan for nigh on seven years and he still couldn't fathom the twists and turns of his master's thoughts. But at least he could relish the knowledge that of all Voltan's henchmen, he was the one that their liege lord trusted most. And that included his son, Drogo. Now, there was a strange youth. Sullen and secretive, his deviousness could create a problem in that some of the younger men had attached themselves to his beck and call, creating a power clique which threatened the unity of the whole camp. The time of his come-uppance would dawn soon, Chak comforted himself, the day he stepped over the fine line of respect with his father, Voltan.

"The thread of destiny, Chak," Voltan said to him mysteriously once. Chak had drawn his steed up shoulder to shoulder. "It can be spun so easily and yet be a fragile thing. Once it snaps, it cannot be retied and so we must tease it out gently, strand by strand."

Chak was silent. Metaphysical ideas gave him a headache. He had a simple code of life—total obedience to Voltan regardless of the involvement. With such a code, there was no need for argument or discussion.

"What of your own destiny, Chak?" pursued Voltan. "Had I not set you free of the devil wheel. What then?"

Chak remembered that day, seven years ago, for the memory was carved deeply in his mind.

The villagers of the little town of Cappen Tor had sentenced him to death for murder. That he was guilty of the crime there was no doubt and Chak would have been the first to admit his guilt.

He had knifed the man ten times before he died whereas the woman had only required one swift blow. They had deserved to die. Both of them. A price had been agreed and he had accompanied the woman back to her dingy lodgings. The stupid troll had aroused his suspicions by continually forcing him to keep his back to the bedroom door and it came as no surprise when it crept open and her accomplice stood there, cudgel in hand. Chak had watched his entry from the reflection

in a dirty mirror beyond the woman's shoulder. He flung her to the floor and, ducking his assailant's first blow, drove the knife under the ribs but it jarred against bone. Again, his opponent tried to chop at his head but Chak was a street fighter of old. He danced away and cut at the man again and again until he dropped to the floor. It had been so easy and so exhilarating. His opponent had been slow and ponderous so that it had been child's play. When the slut began to scream enough to quake the house, one quick lunge had been sufficient to silence her squawl, but insufficient to make his escape. Two vigilants had manacled him in the narrow cobbled street outside.

The sentence of death in Cappen Tor meant execution on the devil wheel.

Like a huge cartwheel it jutted from the town's high wall, circling free above a drop of three hundred feet into the gorge below. Felons were strapped to it with tough but pliant leather thongs and left there; either to die lingeringly of exposure or from the pecking wounds of carrion eagles who swooped about the canyon always ready for their next meal. The leather fastenings would harden and contract with every weather change and if a criminal were lucky he would be strangled by the tightening bonds; or they would rot and snap, hurling him to the valley floor below.

And all the while the inhabitants of Cappen Tor had their free entertainment of turning the handle which, through a mesh of wooden gears and cogs, rotated the giant wheel round and round.

Chak had spent half a day on the infernal machine, twisting and heaving to frighten away the curved beaks of the birds which threatened to peck out his shiny eyes before he was hauled to safety by Voltan's band of raiders.

Had it been three days earlier Chak could well have been dead at their hands, for they had shown no mercy putting to the sword all full grown men in town. It had been touch and go even then. In the wink of an eye Voltan could have decided to leave him on the wheel. Instead he gave Chak a choice. He could burn down Cappen Tor with its surviving inhabitants penned inside, the old men, the infirm, women and children, or he could remain where he was.

Chak had positively itched to lay his hands on the fire torch and had felt the rush of fiendish excitement as he watched the funeral pyre that had once been Cappen Tor burn and listened to the frantic screams which issued from the flames.

Voltan chose his men well. For Chak it had been an easy decision.

"What of your own destiny, Chak?" pursued Voltan. "Had I not set you free of the devil wheel. What then?"

"I would have ended up in the gizzards of crows and eagles," Chak

answered sourly.

Voltan laughed inwardly. “Maybe I cheated you of a fine destiny, my friend,” he confided. “Think! Even now, you could be wheeling in the sky, looking down on the rest of us through a thousand pairs of eyes.”

The track kinked round a bend and, tucked into the crook, was a tavern. Rickety poles propped up a lean-to awning over some badly-made wooden tables, but the place itself was no more than a flat-topped outcropping of rock on which a crude shelter had been fashioned.

A crack in the rock face had been chipped away and within the man-made cleft a fat, roly poly man sat, watching over his small domain. His long girdled tunic was greasy with foodstains and spilt beer and his apron was as filthy as the rest of him. He kept shouting up at an equally dirty cook who manipulated a spit over a brazier on the upper floor.

“More ale, cook,” bellowed the tavern keeper.

He only had the two customers, both of them rough and ill-kempt with beards in need of scissors.

However much the tavern keeper shouted, the cook paid not the slightest notice but kept on turning the fatty meat over the red coals, jerking back with a curse each time it spat a hot greasy globule at him and all the while muttering dark obscenities at his fat employer down below.

The tavern keeper quailed on seeing Voltan and his entourage of five men, wetting his lips constantly as they tied their horses to the hitching rail by the side of the inn.

Chak smiled. He could smell the innkeeper’s fear from thirty paces and it wrinkled even his nose. This was something which never failed to give him satisfaction, the sight of rapacious porkers like this merchant turning to jelly at the approach of his master, Voltan. He hated them all, the grubby peasants, the bovine farmers, the seller of this and that, the pimples and warts who thought they were superior to such as he. But they all quaked in the presence of naked steel and when they died they all pleaded their importance as a reason for living.

“You have news for us, porkmeat,” he called out to the tavern keeper. “Do not keep my master waiting. What tales have you to tell today?”

The innkeeper attempted a light laugh in greeting but it dribbled out of his mouth like leaking water. Upstairs, the meat burned on the spit but the cook paid no heed. Afterwards, he would get belaboured about the head by the fat one but, now, he enjoyed every second of

porkmeat's obvious fear. Porkmeat! He would remember *that* with joyful spite.

"I am honoured by your presence," blabbed Porkmeat, wiping his hands over and over on his apron. "Let me fetch you ale. Perhaps a morsel to whet your appetite?"

Voltan loomed over him and his words stammered to a close.

"My liege lord would rather sup with hogs than eat in this hovel," said Chak threatening to strike the foolish man. "Your ears are larger than your stomach. What gossip have you stored in your blubber body that my master should hear?"

"Master," the innkeeper whined. "I am a wretched man and keep myself to myself." He raced on, hopeful that his words were appropriate. "Never would I be party to spiteful slander or malicious rumour—"

His voice squeaked up in pitch and was choked off as Voltan caught him by the throat.

"Tell me of the rumours," Voltan whispered, loosening his grip so that the other could talk.

"I swear I know nothing for sure," squealed the fat man. "But they say—"

"They say what?" Voltan urged.

"They say that a one-armed man is searching far and wide."

Voltan smiled his private smile. "Searching for what?"

"I know not." The innkeeper almost cried in panic. "I swear it."

"You will tell us immediately if he comes here."

Voltan smoothed the innkeeper's apparel then thought better of it. Something had been bothering him and he looked about and stared at the two roughs who talked and ate loudly out front. They dipped chunks of bread into their bowls of mutton broth and sucked the soggy dough, slurping noisily.

Chak looked at his leader's face and understood his irritation. He strode over to the two louts, drew his sword and pointed it down at them.

"Animals!" He slapped the blade flat on the table to mark his words. "When Voltan is in your presence you do not continue to eat."

One of the roughs looked at Chak goggle-eyed.

"Nor do you sit on your greasy backsides."

The goggle-eyed lout was prepared to stand but his friend put a restraining hand on his shoulder. "Sit!" Feral eyes poked out beneath shaggy eyebrows. "I rise to no man. Save the man who pays my wages —"

His overweening tone faded as he became aware of the movement of men about him.

“And who pays your wages this night?” asked Voltan in a deceptively friendly tone.

“My master is Sped, the Hunchback,” said the rough warily. “We are slavers on the River Shale.” He gained confidence as he spoke and a little of his bluster returned. “And we do not take kindly to strangers trying to teach us good manners.”

“Watch your mouth, dog,” spat Chak. “You speak—”

Voltan shushed him and Chak for a moment was puzzled.

“No, no!” said Voltan. “I like a man with spirit.”

The silent lout giggled at this and Voltan put a comradely hand on his back. Abruptly, steel-like fingers gripped the nape of the idiot’s neck and squeezed. Not a sound came from his yawning mouth and his eyes dilated. His body was completely paralysed.

“But remember this and remember it well,” went on Voltan, but the affable tone had shaded into ice. “Voltan owns everything. The table, the chairs, the very food you eat. I own everything including your useless life. Remember it well.”

He released his grip and the wide-eyed simpleton slumped on to the table, his head at an awkward angle, neck snapped.

“Your friend has lost his appetite it seems,” Voltan commented to the gawping rough whose cowed expression was turning to one of rage at his comrade’s death.

“The Hunchback will have something to say about this,” he blurted.

“The Hunchback may have many things to say, but you have already said too much.”

Voltan was bored and he turned to Chak. “Cut the tongue from his head. It tires me.”

Chak signalled to two men who quickly pinned the unfortunate man and forced his mouth open. With a grin Chak stroked the edge of his knife against the ball of his thumb.

Voltan stopped in front of the shaking innkeeper on his way to gather his horse.

“I trust you have learned something from this.”

Porkmeat’s chin wobbled up and down.

“I will be kept informed of any strangers passing this way or of any unusual occurrence, you understand?” While he spoke, the rough’s cries had risen in agony and then an appalling, shorn silence.

The innkeeper felt his plump stomach heave and it now felt as if his own tongue had swollen inordinately for his mouth.

# 8

## THE FOREST OF WEIR

Hawk and Ranulf warmed their chilled bones at the fire they had summoned out of the few dry branches they could find in this wet and inhospitable terrain. Dusk was falling and it would soon be dark but they still had far to go.

Ranulf leaned against a tree checking the clips which contained his crossbow bolts, every so often glancing over covertly at his silent companion.

"The Dark One will not be easy to overcome," he said eventually.

Hawk only nodded.

"Have you ever crossed swords with this devil?" Ranulf was hesitant with his question.

He waited in vain for a response while Hawk sank deeper into a melancholy mood.

A leaf fluttered down from above, was caught in the updraught of the fire's smoke and jiggled against the bole of a tree facing Ranulf. Without thinking he aimed.

"When I had Voltan in my sights," he said to no one in particular, "I should have fired."

He pulled the trigger and the red pointed shaft flashed from the string and pinned the restless leaf neatly to the tree.

The whizzing crack jumped Hawk from his brooding.

"I could have killed him, you know," repeated Ranulf.

"The Black Ones protect their own." Hawk roused himself and patted his sword harness. "Come!" he said. "Our horses have rested enough. I have others to find—comrades who have fought by my side before."

"We have little time left," agreed Ranulf.

"There is one who will help us find them. But the way lies through the Forest of Weir."

A momentary expression of fear shadowed the veteran's face as the two men mounted their horses.

"The shortest route is often the most dangerous," confirmed Hawk.

The forest floor muffled the plodding hooves of their horses and as the fading light drained from the sky they followed the edge of the Great Wood northwards. Now, the creatures of the night made

themselves heard. A wolf howled its whooping call and somewhere its mate repeated the sound.

Ranulf's muscles were tight with tension and his legs ached from squeezing against his steed's flanks. Even the hoot of an owl had him peering pointlessly into the darkness of the trees. They broke free of the forest and in the fast failing light galloped across a tract of scrubland, steadily outrunning the pack of grey shapes which had slowly materialised behind them, slavering jaws agape.

Looming out of the shadows ahead of them, the dim outlines of a massive portal shimmered: two great slabs of stones, gigantic dolmens which supported a third horizontal block. And emanating from the inky darkness of the entrance a whistling noise swirled like the vibrations of rippling metal ribbons.

Their horses high-stepped with unease.

"Beyond the gate," cried Hawk, "It will be as darkest night but the mindsword shall light our way."

Ranulf swallowed hard and nodded albeit apprehensively.

"Leave the circle of light and I may be powerless to help you."

Hawk cocked his head and raised his eyebrows to look at the old warrior pointedly. Ranulf's shrug told him everything and he felt a warm glow of camaraderie for the grizzled warrior. He held up the mindsword by the hilt, stared in concentration and with a suddenness the mindstone flared with a green nimbus which bathed the stone of the gateway with an olive hue. Spurring their horses, they passed through the portal into the Forest of Weir.

Within, there was total darkness and the only light was the luminescence cast by the mindsword. A glacial cold which rimed the facial hairs with frost sat on the back of a continual, sleety gust.

They rode close together. Sibilant hisses and chittering stridulations ebbed and welled around them, coating the night with menace.

"The Land has changed," breathed Hawk. "Wolves hunt where there were none before. This was once a green forest, full of sunlight. Now it is a place of darkness and evil. What has happened to the Land?"

It was a question which could not be answered.

"Tell me of the companions you hope to find," said Ranulf, changing the subject to something he thought might be a bit more cheerful in this dreadful place.

"The men we seek are the last of their kind: Gort, a giant from the mountains at the edge of the world; Crow, an elfin bowman from the silver forests, now burnt and blackened; and Baldin, a dwarf from the Iron Hills."

A long, elongated, furry thing bolted across their path scaring their

mounts and Ranulf's horse reared and retreated from the pool of light. Immediately the inkiness was scintillated with a thousand eyes which moved with a concerted rush towards him. Hawk swung the sword by its tip in a broad arc and the spraying radiance made the eyes wink out and cower back into their protective gloom.

Whiplike, a snaking tendril rippled out and raked the withers of Ranulf's horse. Nostrils flaring, it scrabbled in the air with its front hooves and would have unseated Ranulf had not Hawk swooped across and seized its straining bridle.

Terrible staring orbs of eyes swam in the half light and snarled from a maw spiked with needle teeth. There was a glimpse of a pink hairiness and a huge grotesque head, spatulate fingered hands of enormous size and power.

For an instant it tried to take advantage of Hawk's preoccupation with Ranulf's struggling steed, but the one-handed man let loose a string of bolts from his repeating crossbow. Some whistled past harmlessly but two sank into the pelted body and a third bored into a screaming eyeball. Its high-pitched squeal scaled up beyond human hearing and it plunged back into the night.

"Ride!" urged Hawk.

Their horses needed little bidding but leapt forward and galloped towards a second portal which glimmered ahead. They fled from a fast-gathering storm, pursued by the menacing frenzy of some unseen host. A fetid odour threatened to engulf them and they took pinched breaths to avoid the stench. The clamour and din of the following furies was now deafening and Ranulf's sanity boiled beneath the pressure.

He wanted to fall off his horse, to slide down its foam lathered shoulders and rest on the cool earth. A hundred sweet voices told him they would warm and caress his fevered body of its aches.

"Don't listen!" screamed Hawk. "Shut them out!"

Dimly, Ranulf could hear the young Lord shouting absurdities at the top of his lungs, whooping and hollering, a man possessed. Like a man drugged, Ranulf sucked himself back out of the clutches of the siren voices and with sudden comprehension began ullulating as insanely as Hawk.

Still bawling meaningless sounds they raced through the gateway into the normalcy of a fresh dawn of a new day.

Breathless and panting, they slowed to a trot, their adrenalin still pumping furiously through their bloodstreams. Their gibberish madness made them look at one another sheepishly and they soon dissolved into helpless laughter.

“By all that’s holy in Kavalar,” wheezed Ranulf, “What *was* that back there?”

Hawk took a deep breath and resheathed the quiescent mindsword.

“Krites! Flesh eaters.” He looked at the veteran with a twinkle in his eye. “Come—*old warrior*. We shall reach Meena’s cave by the end of this day.”

Ranulf flushed with pride at the “old warrior”. They really were comrades now.

“What happened to all of last night?” he queried. “We were but in the Forest for a short time although it seemed like it would cost me the rest of my life.”

“I have heard it explained,” said Hawk seriously. “Something about the distance between one second and another being shorter in the Forest of Weir. Thus a journey of a night would be only a matter of minutes there. They say that the Forest of Weir is really a crossroads in time and space.”

Ranulf scratched his head.

“Between our world and other worlds,” explained Hawk. He laughed. “It’s beyond me too, Ranulf. But the things which exist in there have no right to exist anywhere.”

“God put me in the Pit of Gimri!” the veteran whistled after some thought. “Had we gone the wrong way at this crossroads of yours we could have finished up—” He ended lamely.

“Anywhere in the universe,” Hawk said for him. “That is if the theories are true.”

They trotted on for another mile across a grassland overgrown with bushes and shrubs in which the early morning dew shimmered as it turned to whispers of mist in the morning air.

“This woman. Meena. What should I know about her?” Ranulf enquired.

Meena tended a pot suspended over a fire kindled in a small ring of stones, now and then popping an aromatic herb into the brew. She had started preparing the broth at the first intimation of Hawk and Ranulf traversing Weir safely.

She gave the cauldron’s contents a final stir and looked towards the cave entrance.

“Enter, Lord Hawk,” she welcomed. “And bring the one-handed one with you.”

The two men bent low as they entered the throat of the cave.

“Sit, sit,” she beckoned. “I have prepared food for your coming.”

Ranulf frowned. How had she known?

"She has her ways," whispered Hawk to ease his perplexity.

A faint smile flitted over the woman's chalk-white face; she spooned the pot's brew into two bowls and handed them to the two men.

Hungrily, they gulped down the hot stew.

"I need your help," said Hawk once he had taken the edge off his hunger. "There is so little time and I have comrades to find."

Meena nodded but pressed them to finish their meal.

Once Ranulf had eaten, a strange langour stole over him and he found it well nigh impossible to keep his eyelids open. He blamed it partially on the rich broth but not a little on the smoky atmosphere of the small cave.

"Sleep over there in the corner, one-handed one," urged the woman. "You will need to renew your strength."

As she spoke, her voice seemed to croon in Ranulf's ears and hardly had he moved on to the pile of rugs in the corner than he was fast asleep.

"While Ranulf dreams, we have much to do, Lord Hawk," said Meena, preparing various coloured powders on the hearth.

From the folds of her robe she withdrew a gnarled root. It was thick and knobbly.

"This is the Dagda—father of all—Lord of the perfect knowledge. And this—"

She paired the first root with a strangely springy twig.

"This is Lug, the wily one. Slayer of Balor."

Finally she completed the trinity with a silvery shoot.

"Come to us, Nuada of the silver hand."

Meena placed the three objects in front of her then stretched her hands over the fire.

"Help us, Tuatha de Danann, people of the Goddess Danu. See through the mists of mortal man to what only the immortals can see."

She dusted the powders into the fire and a miasma of sweet-smelling smoky colours enveloped Hawk.

"You shall journey to where each man you seek awaits. If he is willing he will return here with you."

She threw the first root into the flames; it flared brightly and Hawk looked into the heart of a spiralling corridor of smoke. Weightless and without fear he fell slowly into the vapour, his thoughts fixed on a giant from the mountains at the edge of the world; an elfin bowman from the Silver Forest; and a dwarf from the Iron Hills.

# 9

## THE GIANT, GORT

The waggon lay tilted at an odd angle and a part of its load of ale barrels had spilled out on to the muddy road. A wooden wheel lying flat on the ground was mute evidence of what had caused the accident. Cursing his luck, the owner of the cart took a kick at the lump in the road which had jarred the wheel off its axle and sent him and his precious cargo sprawling. His ill fortune continued when his clog shoe struck the lump to discover a deep-seated boulder beneath. He hopped and howled, holding a handful of agonised foot.

A deep laugh made him realise that someone else had been witness to his series of disasters.

The road at this point crossed a paved ford before diverging into three directions and the spot was known as Weaver's Crossing although why was a bit of a mystery. Certainly the ale seller had never seen any weavers hereabouts and the gurgling stream was the upper reaches of the River Shale which eventually became a mighty river washing into the Great Lake.

Tenderly, he tested the damaged extremity on the ground and sighed with relief that no broken bones made him wince. Words of annoyance formed on his tongue as he searched for the unfeeling fool who took pleasure in the catastrophes of others. But the words remained unsaid.

Standing on the other side of the brook was a man leaning on the shaft of an enormous sledgehammer. He was huge. At least seven if not eight foot tall. His legs, encased in ballooning black trousers stuffed into massive jackboots, were like pillared tree trunks. Strapped about his chest was a breastplate of polished iron the size and weight of which it would have needed the strength of four ordinary men to lift. A black curling beard ringed a powerful jaw-line, but his head had not a hair upon it and shone like polished stone.

He strode across the ford and joined the cart owner.

"Forgive my laughter," chortled the giant. "But the merry way you danced that jig—"

Gort clamped a hand over his mouth at the memory, coughed to clear his throat of laughter and cast his eye around at the little man's plight. One keg lay at his feet, its contents wholly bubbled out on the grass. The giant sniffed appreciatively.

“A good brew by the smell of it,” he approved.

“The finest ale along the Shale,” sang the ale seller with a disgruntled tone. “Waiting for me to deliver and here I be struck by misfortune.”

From a nearby open-sided shack a group of men argued loudly at a gambling game. Their mode of battle dress and armour suggested that they were mercenaries on the loose looking for a new paymaster. They had paid no heed to what went on in the glade and were too engrossed in their private gaming skills even to show interest in the appearance of the giant.

Gort sniffed the wasted ale again. “Perhaps we can come to an arrangement that will be to our mutual advantage,” he said, licking his lips.

“How?” asked the little man craftily.

“You have a waggon to fix and I have a thirst to satisfy,” began the giant.

The ale seller was an experienced haggler but the giant was a fit match for him and it took a little time to come to an agreement.

“Done!” boomed Gort, swallowing the waggonman’s hand in his own hamlike one.

The giant picked up a barrel, wrenched out the spigot with his teeth and gurgled the beer down in long gulps. He burped cavernously, patted his stomach and proceeded to guzzle another barrelsworth.

The wispy man danced attendance on him and every swallow, every cast-aside empty, was a tiny death to him. He kept moaning out loud but the giant only gave him a lofty squint and downed another four quarts.

Gort wiped the foam from his bearded mouth and smacked his lips.

“Well?” demanded the ale seller.

“Well what?” rejoined Gort.

“I’ve kept my side of the bargain. You’ve drunk as much of my ale as three men.”

“Part of the bargain, skinflint,” rumbled Gort. “First the beer and then there was a price of two pennies mentioned.”

“When the task is done and you haven’t even started yet.”

The little man’s wheedling tone got on the giant’s nerves. He stood up, tightened his belt and hefted the heavy wheel as if it were a round of cheese.

Tucking his shoulder under the frame of the cart, he levered it up until it was level and rocked the wheel back on its axle. A tap with the hammer drove in the spike to hold the wheel on.

His enormous hands picked up the fallen barrels as if they were made of cork and piled them back on the waggon. The ale seller kept up a running counsel during the whole operation and Gort itched to treat the little man like another of his barrels and toss him on the load with the rest.

He thrust out his hand instead. “Pay up, ratnose.”

The ale seller clambered up on the waggon and reached for the reins.

“I haven’t any money with me. So many thieves about.” His nervous embarrassment made him giggle like a girl. “But I’ll bring it you tomorrow—here—at first light.”

A warning bell rang in the giant’s mind. “Bag of dirt,” he threatened with his hammer.

“Strike me and you get nothing,” said the little man quickly, cowering in the shadow of the big man.

Gort snorted his frustration and lowered his hammer, an action which gave the ale seller a new-found cockiness.

“I’ll bring it you tomorrow—some time,” he said in the manner one would adopt with a demanding child. “And there again—”

Gort’s punched fist grabbed him by the scruff of the neck, picked him up like a travelling bag and flung him off the cart into a midden heap of rotting compost.

Spitting out the smelly waste matter and trying to brush the muck off his dress, he watched with consternation the giant stride around the waggon and with a mighty hammer blow split the repaired wheel in half. For a second time, the waggon fell apart and spewed its load out into the road.

“You owe me nothing now, Picknose,” bellowed Gort.

It was too much for the ale seller. He danced in a paroxysm of rage. “Justice! I demand justice.”

The second waggon crash had at last made the mercenaries pay some notice. Their game was ended and boredom caused them to show some interest in the private squabble.

The little man saw he had their attention and, magically, a small bag of coins appeared in his hands.

“Justice!” he cried again. “Look what this big ox has done to my wares. Am I, an honest merchant, to be treated this way?”

A thin-faced, long-boned mercenary sauntered from the shack. He came alongside the merchant, grinning, and casually retrieved him of his money bag.

“The ale seller is right,” reproached the self-appointed leader of the mercenaries. “Be a good fellow now.” His tone was patronising. “And

clear up the mess you've made."

He turned to his fellows who lounged in the opening of the shelter and raised a few insolent chuckles.

"I'd sooner eat cow-dung."

Gort uttered the statement simply. He had weighed up the pros and cons and decided that this was one situation he couldn't walk away from.

The mercenary leader couldn't believe his ears. He looked at each of his comrades before turning to face the giant, his face as hard as granite.

"That can be arranged," he said evenly. "And you can wash it down with your own blood if need be."

"So be it," said Gort.

The six mercenaries fanned out in a semi-circle about the giant who stood there, relaxed, his huge hands resting on the mighty hammer. In the background the ale seller twitched nervously at what he had brought about. He had talked himself into losing a day's sales because of this great oaf. The pleasure it would be to see him stretched out in the dirt. He rubbed his hands in the expectation of the revenge his money had bought.

The mercenaries came with a concerted rush, mingling left and right slashes in their lunging.

Gort moved extremely fast for such a big man. The shaft of his hammer slammed an uppercut at one man, breaking his jaw, and in a continuity of movement the huge iron hammer drove into another attacker's chest, cracking the ribs like chicken bones. A mercenary thrust at him from behind and Gort parried the blow, lashed out a tree trunk leg. An iron-shod boot somersaulted the assailant into the tumbled waggon with bone-rattling force.

The giant spun like a dancer and the scything hammer dropped two more in their tracks. There was only the thin-faced leader left and he just stood there, mouth agape. Too late he lifted his sword. Gort thudded his clenched fist on the man's head and nearly piled him into the soft earth like a centerpole. The mercenary leader collapsed as might a boneless rabbit.

Gort looked about him at the carnage he had wrought and nodded, pleased with the work. A stifled snivelling reminded him of the ale seller. Raising his eyebrows and narrowing his eyes, he rolled towards the shivering figure who fumbled furiously in his jerkin pockets.

An eerie whistling arrested Gort's intentions.

On a grassy knoll, Hawk stood in a column of hanging mist, beckoning to him.

Gort nodded and peered down at the quaking ale seller. “Consider this the luckiest day of your life, toad,” was his parting shot.

The ale seller watched Hawk and the giant step into the pillar of vapour and vanish.

His jaw slumped open and as he swayed to the ground, one hand still held, outstretched, the two pennies.

Gort stood in Meena’s cave. His mind which had hummed with questions was now strangely contented. He understood that he was needed and that was enough. Peacefully he waited with Ranulf for the next of Hawk’s heroes to appear. An elf from the Silver Forest. The woman cast the second twig into the fire.

# 10

## CROW, THE ELFIN BOWMAN

The water bubbled and fizzed when the hot tongs plunged into it. Steam swirled on the surface. The tongs were withdrawn and clamped in the pincers was a finely-beaten arrowhead. Large hands bore it over to a whetstone.

With infinite care, the arrowsmith set the stone in motion with a pumping of his foot on a pedal board which rotated it through a leather belt system. Sparks flew off at an angle as the smith honed the edges to a razor sharp point. Once he was satisfied with his handiwork, the fletcher fitted the diamond-shaped head to a white feathered shaft of supple wood and placed it beside eleven others exactly the same on a table cut from the trunk of a wide-boled oak.

"Last one done," he said finally to his customer who sat in dark shade under an overhanging branch.

With the suppleness of a cat, the figure in the shadow crossed to the table. He was clothed in a lightly clinging suit of tan buckskin and his moccasins were made of a similar material. His long, fine hands checked the weight and feel of the dozen arrows. He looked at the arrowsmith and inclined his head with a quick bobbing motion not unlike that of a small bird. But there was something in his black eyes which recognised the skill of an artisan and the smith nodded back with pride.

Once he had worked on quiver after quiver of arrows for elfin bowmen through his working life but it had been a number of years since he had last tapped out the familiar white shafted bolts. It could have been this very elf. The fletcher couldn't be sure. They all looked so damned alike even though they were so few.

The elf was pathetically thin; his high cheekbones stood out from his hollowed profile and his elongated pointed ears nestled closely to his narrow scalp. While he filled his quiver, these abnormally sharp ears detected sounds coming from the edge of the wood. Two men. But why did they lurk in hiding, he wondered? He took a gold coin from his pouch and offered it to the smith who shook his head at such an overpayment but the elf insisted.

The flash of gold did not go unnoticed by the two men who watched from the cover of the trees.

"A strange individual to be sure," said one of them.

He was a plump man, neatly dressed like a fairly well-to-do merchant. A cocky flat hat rested on his head at a jaunty angle, made of a rich brown velveteen like his doublet, cloak and pantaloons. Here and there a shiny sheen bespoke the fact that his clothes had seen better days but he wore them with a certain seedy panache.

The other man snorted. He was altogether a different character. Rougher and burlier. A hard man dressed in a jerkin suit of dark green hide. He flexed a long bow against the ground.

“I’ve never seen his like before,” he mused. He snorted again. “Whatever—he carries gold and the way he inspects those points, no doubt fancies himself a bowman.”

“I’m not sure about this one, Ralf,” muttered the plump one. A worried look made him shake his head nervously.

Ralf twisted his nose disdainfully.

“We have not failed as yet. Play your part as always and his gold will fill our pockets within the hour. Now—” His voice hardened with resolve. “—get rid of the smith.”

The two of them straightened their garb and walked casually down into the clearing. Ralf hung back and studied the elf. Now he was close to him he sniffed off any worry that might have lingered.

“Good day to you, Master Smith,” said his friend. “I have a hard but rewarding task for you.” His voice was oily and slick, believable and honest. “Our waggon lies with a broken wheel a mile down the road. If you will repair it and return here before sunset, you shall be paid handsomely.”

The smith was unhappy at the idea of the long walk and his face showed his lack of interest at the prospect. Concealing a moue of irritation, the plump man fixed a glassy smile on his round features and dug deeply into his money belt.

“Part payment in advance,” he intrigued, grudging every coin he had to part with to make the fellow leave.

The smith gathered a few tools and disappeared along the indicated route.

“Greetings!” said the plump man to the elf once they found themselves alone. “My friend and I could not but notice the beautiful bow you tend so lovingly.”

The elf oiled the string with precise strokes, but his eyes observed the two men keenly.

“Might one ask if you are bound for the Tournament at Brackley?” Crow was asked and he shook his head.

Discomfited a little by his silence, the fat merchant pressed on nevertheless.

“Permit me to introduce ourselves. This is Ralf of Coggeshall, Master Bowman, and I am his humble companion and confidant, Master Fitzwalter,” said he.

The elf continued his industry.

“To whom do I have the pleasure of addressing myself?” Fitzwalter had no intention of giving up.

Lifting his narrow cat-like eyes, the elf scanned Fitzwalter and his unblinking gaze made the merchant look away disconcerted.

“Crow!”

The word was spoken with a singing lilt to it.

Ralf, who wanted to speed up the proceedings, adopted a swaggering pose and calculatingly notched an arrow into his bowstring. Crow, without changing position or moving a muscle, was, nevertheless, immediately on the alert.

From his doublet, Ralf pulled out an apple, bit off a chunk and tossed it up and down a few times while chewing the fruit. Cheekily, he threw it high into the air and loosed the couched arrow at it. The shaft soared after the fruit, pierced it and drove it higher into the sky before dropping back down. Dexterously he caught the falling arrow and removed it from the apple, promptly taking another bite out of it.

“Our friend can only clean a bow it seems,” he said disparagingly, showing a mouthful of chewed apple.

Fitzwalter fluttered his hands in mock apology.

“Oh dear! I do believe that my impetuous friend is challenging you, Master Crow.”

Crow’s eyes darted searching looks at both men. “He wastes his time and mine.”

Thunk!

The arrow punched into the ground at the elf’s feet. In a blur, Crow leapt to his feet, an arrow already strung, the action so speedy it took both men by surprise.

“Gentlemen! Gentlemen!” placated Fitzwalter. “Calm yourselves, I beg of you.” With a wink to his confederate. “Our friend here is not going to play children’s games. He needs more serious inducement.”

He extracted a bag of coins from his travelling cloak and clinked them in his palm.

“Now—for a small wager, we could make it worth his while.” He smiled expansively at the elf. “Is that not right, sir?”

The question hung in the air for a moment then Crow released a leather pouch from around his neck.

“Name the target,” he said, clipping the words brusquely.

Ralf spat out some apple.

“One hundred paces. The first to cut his marker cleanly,” he rejoined with no prompting.

Fitzwalter paced out the distance to a dead elm and attached a red and yellow cord to the bark.

“Our friend will take the red mark, Ralf,” he called. “The bow to be couched and the arrow to stay in its quiver until I give the signal—one, two, three—shoot! Is that understood?”

Crow nodded curtly while Ralf smiled inwardly at some secret knowledge.

Fitzwalter walked back to station himself behind Crow.

“One!” he said. His hand moved stealthily to pull down a dagger from the folds of his sleeve. “Two!” He withdrew the steel. “Three!” He poised himself to strike at Crow’s back.

There was that strange whistling sound and the point of a sword came to rest behind his ear.

“Leave the odds as they are,” said the voice of Hawk.

The wicked knife fell from Fitzwalter’s nerveless fingers.

Crow turned to see Hawk and a sign of recognition passed quickly between them.

“Now continue where you left off,” said Hawk, giving the sword the slightest tweak.

A very shaky Fitzwalter started his countdown again.

“One! Two! Three!” A sickly smile at Hawk. “Shoot!”

There was a flurry of hands from the two opponents. But one arrow streaked out faster to cut the red cord.

Without a word Crow took the bag of coins from the hand of a pasty-faced Fitzwalter.

“Wait!” Ralf bellowed. “What do you think you’re doing?”

“My arrow hit first,” answered Crow matter-of-factly.

“The devil you say,” snarled Ralf. “My arrow was out of the bow first.”

Crow, who had moved to join Hawk, stopped momentarily.

“No!” He admonished his furious opponent and turned away.

“Pointed ear jackal of the night,” bawled Ralf, stringing his bow, and the sound made Crow’s hands clench. He walked on. Twang!

Hawk pushed out a hand and saved Crow. Ralf’s arrow whistled past. Crow turned slowly to face the red necked bowman.

“There’s only one way to prove it or do you need your friend’s help?” Ralf sneered.

Fitzwalter tried to dissuade his friend.

“I forbid this!” he entreated ineffectually.

“Keep out of this, Fitzwalter,” said Ralf. And then viciously. “Well, little man? Has the quake in your belly stopped your mouth?”

Crow blinked twice.

“I am ready.”

“Then count us down. Master Fitzwalter,” hissed Ralf taking up a clear shooting position at the elf.

“One!” The countdown had a timeless quality. Ralf’s face gleamed from the oiliness of his sweat. “Two!” Hawk remained like a carving in stone. Immobile. “Three!”

The face of Crow was a death mask, his eyes slitted.

“Shoot!” said Fitzwalter mournfully.

The elf’s hands moved too fast and suddenly Ralf, mouth popping, his arrow hardly notched, peered down to see a white feathered shaft jut from his breast.

“I didn’t even see …” Ralf began but he didn’t finish. His breath and life ran out and he crumpled to the ground.

Fitzwalter did not watch Crow vanish with Hawk into the strange smoke. He tottered over to Ralf’s body and fell to his knees beside it.

“I knew it! I knew it!” he shrieked at the stone-deaf archer. “I knew your long tongue and loose mouth would be the death of you! God’s blood! I’d like to tear out your gizzard and throttle you!”

# 11

## THE DWARF AND THE SACRED LAKE

"Look in the flames for the last time, Lord Hawk," breathed Meena. "One more and we are complete. The Table of Five."

She fed the last gnarled sprig into the fire and the spiky shadows leapt and played across the faces of Ranulf, Gort and the taciturn Crow. The flames billowed an aromatic smoke shape which reached out to embrace Hawk.

"Damn you, priest! I'm bored with this childish game. Set me free. Do you hear, spindle legs?"

The angry words echoed loudly across the still waters of the lake to meet a deaf response from the white-robed figures silhouetted on the grassy bank. They intoned a monotonous litany.

"Ma-ta-pa! Ma-ta-pa! Show us the way! Show us the way!"

On and on it droned until their leader, a white haired man with a circlet of gold around his head, held up both hands to silence the chant.

"Spirit of the Sacred Lake—accept our sacrifice."

The High Priest of the Sacred Lake touched the ritual three marks on his face reverently. Each of his accompanying priests had the same blue painted circles on their foreheads and cheeks and they repeated the sign.

"Ma-ta-pa!" They chorused in a quiet undertone.

All of them carried a small bow of bronze and in front of them was a gold chalice in which deep blue flames rippled. With a practised move, they notched wadded arrows and set them alight from the fire and leaning back, in unison, loosed them into the air to arch high and plummet into the lake in a perfect line, but short of a wooden raft which floated in the centre of the lake. The man who was on it, tied by his feet and hands to the four corners like a trussed fowl, had struggled to a sitting position and did not like this new development.

He was tiny but his body was tough like whipcord. A small man with a mass of curly hair and beard; his clothes were made of durable leather and he was spitting angry. He was Baldin, a dwarf from the Iron Hills.

"Cut me loose, dogs," he roared with a voice which belied his size.

“Then I, Baldin of the Iron Hills, will show you what to do with your puny bows.”

On the bank, the High Priest bit back his anger. Why couldn’t these people understand the holy significance of all this? Why did some of them always bawl and shout? Thankfully, most of them lay there accepting their fate.

“Be still, ugly one.” The High Priest felt compelled to answer. “It is a great honour for you to die this way!”

He signalled to his acolytes to prepare their bows again. “When the raft burns, your ashes shall mingle with the holy waters of the lake and you will become a part of its sacred oneness.”

“Ma-ta-pa!” amended the lesser priests, firing another sheaf of arrows at the target.

Two burning shafts hit the raft and the specially-prepared wood of which it was built began to smoulder and burn.

“Here I am about to roast,” groaned Baldin to himself. “And I sit on enough water to put out the fires of Hell. Damn their holy eyes!”

Something beyond the priests on shore caught his attention and his heart rose in delight.

“By all the Gods,” he whistled. “Hawk!”

Baldin shouted the name and the priests wheeled round to face this interloper. No unordained mortal could view this holy rite.

“Lay your bows down,” said Hawk gently. “This warrior is needed.”

Baldin could feel the heat of the burning wood on one of his arms and he tried to lean away from the devouring flames.

“You don’t understand,” said the High Priest coldly. “By dying this way he will be purified and his soul forever cleansed.”

“Priest!” replied Hawk sourly. “I prefer him exactly as he is—unwashed but alive.”

The heat was sizzling the black hairs on the back of the dwarf’s wrist and the sweat that rolled off his face would turn to steam soon. He had manoeuvred his body to get the restraining cords into the flames and with a heart-leaping snap one of his bonds burned through. Reaching down with his free arm, a fervent prayer pleading through his brain, his fingers found the hilt of a dagger in the top of his boots. Praise be the Gods, these idiot priests hadn’t relieved him of it! With a whirlwind activity he cut himself loose and tumbled into the water just as the whole raft crackled into a mighty conflagration.

He swam in the manner of a dog but moved powerfully nevertheless. His head rode high out of the water since it was not, by inclination, his favourite drink.

Never before had a human sacrifice made it back to shore so the

priests cowered back from the small, dripping figure who stomped out of the lake on to dry land. Baldin searched for something and, giving an "ah!" of discovery, recovered his belongings from beside the chalice. There was a long, leather whip which he cracked for good measure making the white robed acolytes jump back more, and a knobbly knobkerrie.

"Greetings, Hawk!"

Hawk gazed at the sopping wet dwarf and a tiny smile lifted the corner of his mouth.

"How did the mighty Baldin come to be in this sorry mess?"

"Too much wine—a friendly fight or two." Baldin shrugged shamefaced. "You know how it goes. A crack on the skull from a sulky wench and I awake to find myself at the mercy of these chanting fools."

His stomach rumbled and he patted it affectionately. "There's a hole here as large as the Pit of Gimri in the Iron Hills."

He whipped out the tip of his lash into the waters of the lake and jerked out a wriggling silver fish. With great gusto he leaned back his head, opened wide his mouth and popped the whole fish in.

"Your diet has improved little since last we met," said Hawk.

"Ah!" Baldin crunched the fish down, relishing every morsel. "But the eye is still as quick."

"Ma-ta-pa!"

The acolytes began their drone once more and had plucked up enough courage to advance on the two men.

"Think again, ugly one," proposed the High Priest pompously. "Great glory would have been thine."

"I'll give you great glory," howled Baldin. He flicked the whip out with lightning speed and, like a sharp knife, it neatly cut away the bottom half of the High Priest's robe. He was left clothed only to the waist and trying to hide his nudity he fled with an embarrassed cry into the bushes, his pale backside bobbling whitely.

"There is great glory indeed," crowed Baldin.

The Table of Five—Gort the Giant, Crow the Elf, Baldin the Dwarf, Ranulf of the One-Hand and the bearer of the mindsword, Hawk—ringed the dying embers of the hearth within Meena's cave. They had eaten well and relaxed in the soft glow of the fire listening to Hawk's explanation of why he had summoned them.

Gort sometimes let his attention wander back to the meal they had just consumed. The woman, whatever or whoever she was, was as subtle a cook as any he had encountered. The thick *bouillon* had been

delicious and the cheese, tart and creamy, had been veined with a cunning taste of fortified wine. And the loaves, nutty and chewy with a crunchy crust just the way he liked it. The pleasant thoughts made him feel the awakening pangs of fresh hunger. He dispelled the dream and concentrated on Hawk's words.

"Now you know the fate that awaits the Abbess of Caddonbury if we fail," said Hawk, looking at each man in turn. "Remember—Voltan has many men and we are few. If it comes to a battle, it will go hard on us."

He paused to let them speak their minds.

"Since I last fought at your side," said Gort breaking the silence, "time has hung heavily." He laughed and patted his large paunch. "And not only time by the look of it eh?"

The dwarf chuckled and poked the giant's stomach with the stem of his briar pipe.

"I yearn for the old days," said Gort sadly, then smacked his knees decisively. "I am with you."

Hawk stretched out a comradely hand to the big man then turned to Crow who spoke not a word, only nodded in his quirky, bird-like manner.

Baldin sucked in a lungful of tobacco smoke and blew it out slowly.

"The Iron Hills are no more. If I am to die," he decided, "why not with friends?"

"Well said," rumbled Gort as delighted as Hawk.

Ranulf, who had sat quietly tinkering with his crossbow, felt a need to join the conversation. "But Voltan will expect his gold soon," he pointed out. "We haven't enough riches to fill a chamber pot."

"That is true," nodded Gort, sniffing. "Hawk? How are we going to make Voltan's mouth water if there's no wine in the cup?"

Meena cleared her throat and approached them from the depths of the cave.

"A day's march from Caddonbury is the River Shale," she told them. "It flows into the Great Lake. Once a month traders come with gold to buy slaves from Sped the Hunchback—a brute as evil in his ways as the Dark One, Voltan. Few would weep the passing of a slaver such as he. And it would be fitting justice for his ill-gotten gold to be used for the ways of good."

"The end truly justifies the means if the Lady Abbess is returned to her flock," said Ranulf keenly.

Hawk pursed his lips. "Hmm!" he demurred. "I have reason to doubt the word of Voltan."

Again Ranulf saw Hawk descend into one of his brown moods,

wishing he could ask the young lord what he brooded upon and why. He watched Hawk's eyes narrow and stare into the far distance while his fingers toyed with a small crucifix about his neck. Ranulf had the curiosity of the ordinary soldier. Poking one's nose into a neighbour's business was a normal part of living in the field. After all, there was little to do between skirmishes but find out why the next man had decided on this way of life. All the warts and bumps of a man's hidden thoughts were easily laid bare in a damp bivouac tent in nowhere land with the rain teeming down outside. Ambitions, aspirations, desires, despairs poured out after a shared pipkin of mulled ale. And the ironic thing was that someone else's private weaknesses struck responsive chords among the other listeners and the knowledge that one's own aberrations were not unique somehow gave one a fleeting glimpse of the possible secret of life. However, one was never able to capitalise on this enlightenment as the mind-shattering insight seemed to disappear with a good night's sleep and the new day dawned leaving one to come to terms with self all over again.

Ranulf pulled his thoughts up short. By all the sleet in Norgard, what was a simple warrior like himself doing having these deep philosophical thoughts. He patted his travelling roll into a more comfortable shape to pillow his head. The movement aroused Hawk.

"Tomorrow at first light we start out for the Church at Caddonbury. Rest well."

Gort had already fallen asleep and Baldin had cosied himself against the giant's soft bulk. Crow sat cross-legged, eyes still open but unmoving. Ranulf yawned. After tomorrow would they find time for sleep or would they all fall prey to the longest sleep of all?

# 12

## THE MONASTERY

The track from Meena's cave to the monastery was a road filled with danger, watched by unseen eyes, and Hawk decided to take a circuitous route to alert no one to their passing. It undulated through thick brushwood and heavy forest. Utter silence brooded everywhere except for sudden rustlings in the dense thickets. At times, the trees rose to an incredible height and arched a green roof over their heads, in places shafted with sharded light and elsewhere close-woven into a solid ceiling of boughs and leaves. Each time the track descended into one of these gloomy hollows, they spurred their horses and rode a little faster towards the lightening nimbus at the end of the natural tunnel of trees.

The five riders presented a picture of odd variety. Hawk rode with a straight back and apparently casual ease on his black stallion, the mighty mindsword strapped to its saddle; Gort loomed large on his unfortunate animal, his legs dangling so low in the stirrups that his horse appeared unhappily small to bear the weight. And the increased burden of his massive hammer made the animal lower its head in greater misery than would have been the case. The sprightly donkey which frisked alongside his superior cousins to show it felt itself to be quite their equal, bore the dwarf, Baldin. He sat half cross-legged in the saddle with his loved, long-stemmed pipe ever in attendance. Crow, by contrast, rode with no saddle, in a semi-crouched position which made him appear weightless on the horse's back—whereas Ranulf presented the stolid style of the mounted soldier, bobbing to the rhythm of his steed's sway.

Gradually the landscape opened out from the woodland into a sparsely treed vista. Grassy slopes led them on to a plateau strewn with boulders which, although crawling with lichen and moss, had a symmetry of shape that betokened the hand of some long-dead mason.

Hawk and his other companions with the exception of the elf, ate while they rode. Hard-rinded cheese from the black upland goat; dry, unsalted biscuit and, when they had the chance, the tart clusters of purple berries they happened upon along the way.

They crossed the flat table of moorland taking the better part of a day until below and ahead of them lay the Great Forest of Caddonbury and their goal—the Monastery of the Holy Word.

The light drained from the sky and at the edge of the wood they

found a narrow, gurgling brook of sweet water to slake their horses' thirst.

Dismounting, they stretched weary muscles. The sky had turned to frosty black velvet, clustered with sparkling points of light.

"The stars are out," said Gort obviously.

Baldin, his back against a tree trunk, glanced up and nodded. "So they are," he acquiesced mildly.

A cold breath reached down from the infinite darkness and sidled up each man's spine to cause a numbing shiver. They all drowsed in broken snatches, dreaming fragments of uneasy patterns and images until dawn pried their tired eyes awake.

They had lit no fire the previous night. A spiralling coil of campfire smoke would have been a calling card to the curious. So their bones were stiff when they continued their journey, taking the better part of that day to knife through the Great Forest and reach the Monastery by nightfall.

"Thank God you have returned safely," welcomed Sister Monica after introductions had been made and cosseted them towards a large table. "Come and sit." She shooed two novices towards an alcove door leading to another part of the church. "Get food and drink for our friends."

Crow had gathered the horses and seen them fed and rubbed down before stationing himself in the doorway to the Monastery. His diet was not that of his companions. He survived on a spartan mixture of water and special granules compounded of vegetable and mineral matter in specific quantities known only to the elfin world. Like the rest of his race, he was secretive and his kind disapproved of the open way man ate. Crow did not watch these activities so had no necessity to pass judgement. He watched and listened to things beyond human ken.

Hawk and the others divested themselves of their heavy accoutrements while Sister Monica fretted around them impatient to ask her questions.

"How do you propose to raise the ransom?" she was finally able to ask.

"A day's ride from here are men who will be only too happy to meet our needs."

Hawk's words made Gort laugh heartily but perplexed Sister Monica momentarily. The humour of men was something she had never been able to understand.

"This is good news indeed," she went on. "Once the gold is here, our lady will be returned."

Hawk and Ranulf's eyes met for a moment and the veteran's eyebrows shot up.

"Would it were that simple," Hawk said carefully. "But I know Voltan as well as I know myself—" His voice faltered but only for an instant. "Let it suffice that there is no guarantee he will return the Abbess even if he is paid the ransom in full."

Sister Monica stopped her ears and shook her head vehemently. "No! No!" she cried. "You must not say such things. He gave his word that once the money was paid then our sister would be returned." She swallowed hard on her anger. "What you speak of is too awful to contemplate."

A nun entered with a plump chicken and showed it to her. She signalled for it to be given to the men and retired to a quiet corner to pray.

Gort rubbed his hands in delight at the sight of the chicken and Baldin's tongue licked hungrily as his mouth watered.

The sister's attitude had taken the edge off Hawk's hunger and Ranulf leaned towards him.

"Her head moves in the clouds, I fear," the veteran muttered. "Let me try to make her understand."

"Ah! Little sister," beamed Gort, stretching out his enormous hands to grab the fowl. "This will do just for me. Return to your kitchen and get more for my friends."

The little nun's eyes opened wide but she did as she had been directed.

Damn his long reach, thought Baldin. Was there no justice in this world? But a crafty idea wormed in his brain.

As Gort with great ceremony raised the chicken to his mouth, which threatened to demolish it with one bite, the dwarf drew in a sharp intake of breath. The giant paused at the frown on Baldin's face.

"What is it?"

Baldin shrugged indifferently.

"It's nothing! Enjoy the food!"

Inwardly laughing, the dwarf fought to keep a solemn countenance at the giant's doleful face.

"It probably wouldn't make any difference to you in any case," said Baldin airily.

Gort lowered the roasted bird and eyed it speculatively.

"You know something, dwarf, that I don't?" He looked down at the small man dangerously. "Out with it!"

"Really, it's of no importance. The food will taste just the same,

believe me."

"Little brother, you are trying my patience. If you don't want to end up even shorter—" He curled one hand into a massive fist, "—your tongue had better speak quickly. Why do you say it will taste the same?"

Baldin drew a deep breath as if making a big decision. "Very well, long shanks. So be it! We …" He spoke the words as if to some dullard. "We are in a monastery. Surely that must be clear to you even though you walk with your head in the clouds."

Gort's eyebrows knitted together and he exhaled threateningly through his nostrils making the dwarf's words trip out faster.

"All I'm saying is—you might be eating holy food!" concluded the little man simply and turned his back on the giant.

"Dammit, little brother, what does that mean? Holy food?"

Baldin faced the big man with a pious expression. "Holy food has a flavour some find not to their liking."

Like a small child, Gort was suspicious of the food.

"You think this is holy food?"

"How do I know?" exclaimed Baldin sternly. "You'll find out soon enough when you eat it."

He prepared to leave but the giant restrained him, a sly smile lurking in the corners of his face.

"You seem to be the expert, little brother. *You eat it,"* he grinned, pressing the juicy bird into the dwarf's grasp; and when Baldin made "no no" noises, screwed the little man up on tiptoe by the scruff of his neck. "But I insist. After all, what are comrades for if not to help one another."

Baldin, with lingering relish, bit into the succulent flesh and desperately concealed his gusto. Each mouthful the little man chewed was a knife in Gort's belly, reminding him of the hollowness within and an answering rumble amplified his hunger.

"Well?" he questioned.

Baldin pursed his lips, debating the point. "It—could—be!" Then quickly added, "And yet!"

"Little brother," exploded Gort almost at the end of his tether. "If I thought for one moment that what you told me was a lie—"

Fortunately for the dwarf, another nun set a platter of unleavened bread and raw vegetables on the table.

"Sister of the faith," he beseeched her. "Tell my ox-like friend here. Would you describe this food as being holy?"

The nun, who was not much taller than Baldin himself and had a

cherubic face, did not need to think twice.

“All food is holy,” she said. “It comes from God!”

Baldin turned to Gort, hunching his shoulders to give him a patronising, told-you-so look while the giant’s mouth dropped open in despair at every morsel which disappeared down the dwarf’s gullet.

Over in a quiet corner, Ranulf patiently listened to the sister.

“I hope I have made the right decision,” she whispered. “My mind is sorely troubled.”

Ranulf roved his eyes around the monastery in irritation. “Sister,” he said tersely. “The return of your lady is Hawk’s first concern.”

But there was a faraway look in Sister Monica’s eyes and she was too deep in her own thoughts to hear him.

“We could have offered what little wealth we have and asked Voltan for sufficient time to pay the rest. I’m sure we could have made him understand.”

“The Dark One understands nothing but the spilling of blood,” Ranulf exclaimed. “Believe me, I’m an old warrior and I know that your salvation from the likes of Voltan lies in having the strength of someone like Hawk to protect you.”

“My son, God protects us,” Sister Monica corrected him.

Ranulf made a wry grimace with his mouth and looked at her obliquely.

“Sister, *He* was protecting the Abbess and look where it’s got her.”

“Ranulf,” pronounced the sister sternly. “Your words flirt with blasphemy.”

“My words are just as true nonetheless.”

Although exasperated, Ranulf was determined to have the last word and he walked away from her cold stare.

He slumped down on a wooden bench beside Hawk and helped himself from the trestle table. Chewing the fresh baked bread, he fretted at the intractability of some people.

“It’s impossible to talk to the woman sensibly,” he blurted, savagely tearing the bread in two.

Hawk nodded and smiled at the veteran’s scowl.

“She will find her own counsel, never fear.” He called for the others’ attention. “Our first concern is the gold. Tomorrow we arrange a welcome for the slavers of the River Shale.”

# 13

## THE SLAVERS ON THE RIVER SHALE

The muffled splash of a lazy oar sounded softly across the still waters of the River Shale and echoed weakly back from the tangled, rooty undergrowth on the bank. A dirty ripple slurped through the tall reeds and pulpy mallows, gurgling another smear of mud in its dying wake.

At this point the river swung in a giant “U” back on itself before swelling out grandly across a flat marshland to spill its liquid ooze into the Giant Lake, a stretch of water so vast it was almost an inland sea.

The boat moved slowly upstream against the sluggish current, a low-lined, sloop-rigged vessel. It now edged towards shore and poked its garishly-painted prow-nose through the clumps of rushes to grate on a rising slope of shingle. Within it, ten heavily-armed men watched and waited warily for the longboat to beach. The reason for their exaggerated caution was a large money chest which lay at the feet of two traders, one plump and glassy-eyed, the other gloomy, cadaverous and ferret-faced. Both wore long coats trimmed at sleeve and collar with greasy fur and fluted, conical hats which somehow gave both men a slightly quizzical air. Their boatman gave a final push with his paddle shaped pole to surge the craft up to the landing.

“Let me strike the bargain this time, Thomas,” said the ferrety-faced trader. “You know how that Hunchback cheated us the last time.”

“Whatever you say, Simon,” agreed Thomas, his jowls wobbling.

Simon opened out a kerchief and liberally sprinkled it from a tiny vial of rosewater. He squinted pointedly at Thomas who nodded morosely.

“Welcome!” bellowed a voice that was half a throaty rasp and totally the roar of an enraged bull. “Welcome, friends. It is good to see you again.”

The Hunchback, Sped, was like a gnarled, oaken tree trunk stuffed into rough-stitched hides which promised to burst apart at the seams. All four limbs protruded from his misshapen body at unnatural angles. When he walked, his knees seemed to be articulated, giving him an odd, rolling gait.

His hairless head was a fleshy stump stuffed on his hunched shoulders slightly left of centre. A black patch covered one eye while the other one glittered with a feral ferocity from a pulpy socket. And

all the while he twirled or trailed behind him a vicious-looking bludgeon.

"I have many fine slaves for you to buy," he enthused loudly, the mashed root he was chewing spilling brown juice in dribbles down his stubbled chin.

Sped waded into the water and, one-handed, dragged the traders' boat further in.

Gingerly, Simon and Thomas clambered ashore, trying to keep their buckled shoes dry and at the same time lean sufficiently windward of the Hunchback's rancid breath. Their irritation was doubly compounded when they succeeded in achieving neither.

The ten guards followed bearing the heavy chest. But always with one hand on the hilts of their swords. They tried to outstare Sped's ill-assorted gang of ruffians and both sides were so anxious observing one another they failed to notice the minute movements in the surrounding green cover.

Crow flitted between trees, his passage a blur of brown, too smooth and quick to detect except as a light rustle such as the wind might make. His eyes flicked around the activity in the slavers' camp, noting the position of each armed man in relation to one another. Off to his left, Ranulf bobbed up for an instant and winked at him broadly. Crow registered the wink expressionlessly. Humans always felt this need to signify their inner emotions with a body twitch of some description. Sometimes, like now, such a facial grimace was meant to convey a bond of brotherhood and Crow hoped his passive stare in return was reciprocally understood. That it wasn't was another strangeness peculiar to humans.

Gort held himself in readiness behind a broad boled tree close to the river's edge. Its girth just about concealed his own diameter and he tapped silently on the handle of his hammer, impatient for the fight to begin. Idly he studied the tree more closely. It had not a leaf on its skeletal branches. They had all died, Gort realised, from the innumerable bird droppings which coated each leafless limb. At that moment the guilty ones flapped up on to the bare branches and preened themselves. Grey cormorants always had a chosen tree to dry their feathers after duck-diving into the water of the Shale's estuary.

An acorn cap clipped his ear, stopped his musing on diving birds. Baldin peeped from behind a giant dock, checking on his big comrade's alertness. The dwarf nodded at the giant's sheepish look. Probably dreaming about food as usual, thought Baldin, which proved that even dwarves can get it wrong.

The camp was a littered mess of carelessly-hung goatskin covers, stretched on available branches to make lean-to tents. A pole spanned

two stunted trees and roped to it, hands high above their heads like pink-scraped pig carcases, were a line of shivering adult male slaves clad only in loin clouts.

Sped weaved between them, sometimes poking an unfortunate fellow with his club, sometimes breathing heavily at the traders.

"Well? Well?" he rasped. "Did I mislead you? Aren't they a fine bunch?" A prod at one slave's pot belly to push back a paunch swollen through malnutrition. "It cost me blood I tell you to collect these fine specimens."

A chorus of confirmation rumbled round his men.

"They don't call Sped the finest trader the length and breadth of the River Shale for nothing, you know," he boasted, hiding an elderly goose-pimpled man who was no more than a sagging bag of bones, with his bulk. "Play square with me and I'll play square with you." Each sibilant sound expelled droplets of rank-smelling root-juice. "Play foul with Sped and God help you."

He thumped the ground with his club and extracted some weak grins from his own men, many of whom had heard this oath a number of times before.

Simon and Thomas made their examination of the slaves around him or over him. This time they were not going to be rushed into a price. And by the same token a few sighs of contempt for the wares, they hoped, would throw the wily Hunchback off balance.

"Not as good as last time," demurred the ferrety one, Simon.

"No, indeed," affirmed Thomas.

"What?" exploded Sped, making the two men sway back with his loud expulsion of breath. "Look at the fine biceps on this one."

He was about to tweezer a slave's arm muscle when there was a loud report.

Crack! The dry twig snapped and the suddenness of sound spun Hunchback and traders alike on their heels.

"Greetings!"

Hawk stood on a grassy knoll above the slavers' encampment, leaning on the mindsword. At his soft spoken word a ripple of tiny movements ran through the armed men on both sides. Steel whispered from leather scabbards and there was a rustle of arrows into bows.

Sped crashed his club to the ground and each measured word was weighed with menace.

"I don't know what you're doing here, but you've chosen the wrong time to do it."

"My apologies," said Hawk so airily it made the Hunchback dilate his one good eye even more. "But I have an urgent request to make."

“Request?” Sped was nonplussed.

“Yes. I find myself in need of two thousand gold pieces and have been told that yonder chest contains sufficient for my cause.”

Sped’s face was a medley of conflicting expressions.

“I shall need some help to unload it,” went on Hawk, confounding his enemies into silence.

“It’s a jest,” chortled Sped after a brief pause. “That’s a good ’un!”

The armour plate on his chest jerked up and down as his chest heaved with wheezy laughter.

“It’s no jest.”

The abrupt hardness which entered Hawk’s voice stilled the Hunchback’s mirth and the sniggers of his men tailed off into an uneasy quiet. The joke of the situation palled on Sped and he pointed a stubby finger in Hawk’s direction.

“Who will rid me of this madman?” he spluttered. “Cut him down!”

Hardly a man moved, then the air was alive with the humming of bees.

The white arrows from the bow of the elf, Crow, buzzed with deadly accuracy. Six men collapsed with choked cries, six shafts buried in each chest, six rapid bowshots in the time it would have taken any mortal man to unloose one arrow.

Baldin’s whip snaked out around the neck of the boatman, and yanked him backwards off the stern of the boat into the shallow mud.

Yells of rage and pain mingled with the bellowing fury of the Hunchback. A tangle of men rushed every which way.

Ranulf’s crossbow exploded its red bolts and sprayed them at the charging mass of men. Some spun and fell. The rest came on with berserker rage.

Hawk sidestepped nimbly. Blade caught blade and the momentum of the attacker carried him flailing past. The glowing mindsword gleamed in a swathe of light and sent the assailant to perdition.

Swords hummed from sheaths—clashed and rang. But the sharp honed steel of Hawk’s sword cleaved through mail, leather and, finally, bone.

Gort simply waded through the throng choosing some unfortunate at random to have his skull cracked with the mighty hammer.

The dwarf was fighting for his life. Three scruffs had pinned him against a covert of thorns and there was no way for the little man to escape. The cracking whip and knobkerrie had kept them at a distance but they were fast realising that they could now overcome him. Grinning, they moved in for the kill.

There was a roaring through the air and a sickening crunch as the Giant's hammer drove at the skulls of first one man and then another and another.

"Do take them on one at a time, dwarf," Gort chided him. "Remember that you're a—!"

Baldin erupted into action with his lash and the ripping ribbon of leather hissed past the giant's ear to whip around an upraised sword, poised to plunge into the big man's unprotected back. The dwarf whisked the aggressor towards him until he was in range to deliver a hard tap with his cudgel.

"You were saying?" he said perkily.

Gort's breath whistled from him through pursed lips. "I was saying —that you're a fine fellow to have looking over your shoulder," he chuckled, hoisting Baldin up on to his back.

It took Sped a thunderstruck moment to grasp that his gang of slavers were all lying at his feet, either badly wounded or dead. He snarled and threatened with his club but Hawk's blade was suddenly tickling his midriff. Hawk motioned with a finger for him to let the bludgeon fall and Sped had no choice but to comply.

Simon and Thomas, the traders, had cowered behind the terrified slaves and now peeped out at the carnage in the camp.

Hawk gestured to the two men. "Release them," he said, indicating the tied prisoners.

For a moment the traders hesitated and two of Crow's arrows neatly pinned their conical hats to a tree.

With new-found alacrity, the ferrety-faced one, Simon, chopped at the slaves' binds and, taking advantage of the melee this caused, streaked into the bushes. His fat friend squeaked after him in fearful pursuit.

Crow's bow was already strung.

"Let them go," said Hawk.

Gort and Baldin had rescued the treasure chest and the giant snapped the simple metal lock with ease. Inside were leather bags, each containing a number of gold and silver coins.

Hawk threw one of the money bags to the nearest released slave. "Take this and return to your homes."

The freed men were tongue-tied and remained motionless until Baldin cracked his whip and shooed them scampering into the forest.

"What about fat man, here?" asked Gort, grabbing Sped by the scruff of his neck.

"I'm sure you'll think of something," said Hawk cryptically.

Gort grinned and jerked the Hunchback off his feet.

“Put me down, you overstuffed bull,” bawled Sped.

“With pleasure,” rejoined the giant after getting too close to a whiff of the slaver’s charms.

He dropped Sped to the ground where he lay on his back like a struggling upturned turtle.

“Damn you, eater of dung, I’ll make you pay double for this,” he screamed.

“You still haven’t learned the lesson of humility, have you, worm?”

Gort bestrode the scrabbling Hunchback and leaned his hammer on Sped’s ample belly.

“Give me my club and I’ll crack your head like the putrid egg it is,” ranted Sped.

Gort eyed him pensively and weighed Sped’s club in his hand.

“You give me an idea, foul mouth! Since you lay great store by this club of yours …”

The giant’s laughter rang across the River Shale and it boded the Hunchback ill. By the time the echoes had paled, he found himself still on his back but this time pegged out as if for drying.

Gort hummed a merry tune as he flung a rope up and over a high bough above the prone Hunchback. “Rum, pum, rumpity pum!”

He hauled Sped’s mighty bludgeon up and up till he was satisfied that it swung like some awful Sword of Damocles directly over Sped’s head.

“Open wide!”

He took the loose end, prodded the Hunchback’s evil mouth open and stifled the obscenities and curses flowing from it with the rope end.

“Wider! Good! Now bite hard my friend.”

Too late did Sped realise what he had done as his teeth clamped on the rope. Above him the club swung ominously.

“Now, prattle tale,” scolded Gort, ignoring the choked animal noises issuing from the lump on the ground. “I advise you to stay silent. One word from that foul mouth of yours and—”

The giant looked up at the bludgeon glumly and smacked his great hands together. “But, on the other hand,” continued Gort, “one of your bought slaves might happen along and find you here. No doubt he’ll want to exchange happy memories with you. The kind to have you laughing loudly.”

Sped gritted his teeth and groaned. The giant’s voice reached him from a distance.

“Our thanks, brother,” he called as an afterthought, “for the bountiful gifts you have bestowed upon us.”

This last jibe proved too much for Sped. His good eye bulged and the veins stood out on his neck.

“Damn you all to h—!” he began to scream, remembered and looked up in terror.

As his jaw slacked open, the rope was unloosed and all he could see was that awful club plummeting down.

Gort flinched in his saddle as the bludgeon hit with a squishy sound.

“Some people can’t keep their mouths shut,” he said sadly, crossing himself.

# 14

## DROGO, SON OF VOLTAN

Three carrion crows wheeled in the leaden sky then spiralled down lazily to roost on a single, towering pine. Their grey-hooded eyes watched the men bear the wild hog on a pole into the camp, leaving a trail of warm, wet blood back into the dark forest.

Small bivouac tents with harness and sword tackle out front were dotted haphazardly throughout the leafy glade. A huge burning central fire smoked gusts into the chill air and it was here the men bore their kill. Willing hands prepared a roasting spit but they talked in low whispers.

A sense of unease lay over the camp and the men cleaning their battle armour and weapons kept glancing at the dull-coloured pavilion which housed their leader, Voltan. When he was in one of his dark moods no man's life was certain. It was better to wait out the ill humour and let his malaise dissipate naturally.

Within Voltan felt the gnawing pain course through the left side of his face. To allay the torment he eased the iron helmet from his head and exposed his blackened eye socket. From a corner of the expansive tent there was a sharp intake of breath. Voltan pushed the masked helm back in place and clutched the arms of the heavy wood and leather chair he sat upon to tense his muscles and drive the pain out that way.

"I know the art of curing," said a gentle feminine voice. "Shall I tend your face?"

Voltan looked across at the Lady Abbess.

She was kneeling on some straw in a cage which, from its size, had once been used to transport a wild animal as large as a wolf. Her eyes looked at him with compassion and she held on to the bars of her prison tightly, her knuckles white.

Half of Voltan hated her woman's ways which could so easily eat at one's resolve but the other half of him found a strange sense of peace in her presence. That he would have the strength to murder her in cold blood if the need arose, did not enter his calculations however.

"There is no cure for this face, woman," he said in a hollow tone. "Only periods of relief."

The Abbess would have liked to have said more but the tent flap was pulled back and Chak came in.

“Your son, Drogo, wishes words with you,” said Chak, keeping his voice flat so that his own antipathy to the youth would not colour his words in any way.

Voltan waved his hand to allow the audience and Drogo brushed past Chak without giving his father’s lieutenant a respectful glance. Chak’s eyes narrowed at the implied insult but withdrew without comment.

“My hunting party has returned,” said Drogo and waited in vain for some reaction from his father. “We caught ourselves a hog—and a meaty one by the look of it.”

There was a pause which seemed to last an eternity to young Drogo.

He bore an arrogant mien. With sun-bleached hair he had a pleasing cast of face but had decided in his years of decision that a sneering, sullen look was the best disposition to prove he had no fear of death.

At last his father spoke, dangerously quiet.

“And you required an audience to give me this news — about a hog?”

“I did wish to speak to you about another matter.”

“Speak then.”

Drogo tapped his hand with his riding quirt, grabbing a few seconds to get the words ready. He had wanted to lay a detailed plan before his father but instead it all came out with a rush.

“Let *me* raid the fat lords in the north. I will send cold fear into their hearts.”

There was no response from Voltan and he felt emboldened to continue.

“All I ask is that you give me command of some men to prove my strength. My blood is forever on the move. It needs excitement.”

His eyes sparkled at the prospect and there was no denying the resolve in his voice.

Voltan raised himself leisurely from his chair and faced his son. With infinite slowness he raised both arms and held his son’s face between his hands as if to study it more intently. A flicker of a smile crossed Drogo’s countenance.

All of a sudden Voltan jerked his son backwards over a trestle table, pinning him down with one arm and threatening to press him further with the other.

“If I were to press one inch more,” hissed Voltan into Drogo’s ear, “your backbone would snap like rotten wood. Is this not excitement? Is not the fine choice between living and dying more than enough to make your hot blood race through your veins?”

As quickly as he had seized him, Voltan removed the pressure and swung him off the table like an old sack to send Drogo crashing into the corner by a large, brass-bound coffer where he lay, still shaking from the back-racking pain.

"We will talk of this no more," snapped Voltan with finality. "My face pains me!"

Drogo watched his father turn his back on him with contempt. Glimpsewise, he could feel the gaze of the Abbess stroke him with—what? More contempt, hidden laughter, a patronising sneer?

Jaws clamped, his trembling hand strayed to the dagger at his waist. It clicked and made a slight purr as he withdrew it haltingly from its velvet sheath.

Voltan heard the whisper of steel from behind his back but he did not turn around.

"Draw your dagger out one more inch and you are a dead man," he breathed. "Be you my son or not."

A nervous spasm knotted Drogo's cheek. He hated the fear his father could instil in him and a red worm clawed at his belly as he rushed from the tent blindly, head down just in case there was the slightest hint of weakness in his eyes. He was damned if Chak would have that satisfaction.

Some of his cronies tried to engage his attention but the fury was boiling up into his chest and his brain reeled with blood hate.

He wrenched his horse savagely from its rail, paying scant heed to its hurt whinny, swung up on to its back and rode hard from camp scattering men and chickens alike in his path.

Drogo felt little but the hard surge of his gallop. The wind of his ride whined about him, slanting his eyes so thin that the rolling trees lost their colour and became black etchings on a grey background.

He burst into a clearing and drove hard along a well-defined forest path, whipping his animal viciously.

Across his path loomed a shape and his horse, by instinct, veered aside, reared and halted.

The shape became a bundle of clothing sent spinning into the bushes. It was a man in a long coat, trimmed with greasy fur. It was Simon, the erstwhile trader of slaves. The ferrety-faced one.

"What filthy ferret have we here?"

"I beg you," pleaded Simon-Ferret. "Have pity on me. I barely escaped with my life."

He had remained on his knees and waddled across on them, hands clasped together in front of a blubbering mouth.

"You may not escape so easily from the hands of Drogo, son of

Voltan."

His first thought had been to ride the man down and pound him into the dirt of the forest floor with his horse's hooves. But the molten hate he had felt had given way to an evil wantonness which thirsted for a more lingering sense of fulfilment. He drew his sword with an exaggerated tenderness.

Simon only saw a smiling face atop the horse and the curl of Drogo's lip iced his veins.

"If you are who you say you are, put away your sword," the slave trader wheedled, desperately trying to think of something that would save his skin. This young blood had dead eyes, pupils which would only spark with the dying rattle of his next victim; which could very well be himself gulped Simon. "We are brothers under the skin. I buy slaves on the River Shale."

The words had no sooner crossed his lips than Drogo leapt from his horse in a towering rage, sword fully drawn.

"You dare to call me brother," he mouthed with venom. "You—a slaver?"

Simon fell backwards as the sword point ran at him.

"God's teeth!" he screamed. "Listen to me! I have words of great importance for you."

The last word tailed into a choked sob and he shut his eyes, waiting for a deathblow which never came.

"Your news had better be good," hissed Drogo, curious in spite of himself.

"Would the news that a certain Hunchback was no longer the Master of the River Slavers be important?" Simon blurted as quickly as possible.

Drogo sheathed his sword. "Go on!"

"And that a band of warriors led by a certain man had taken possession of the Hunchback's gold?"

"What *man?* Get to the point," threatened Drogo, catching the ferrety-faced man by the throat.

"All right! But you're choking me," gasped Simon—and, as Drogo eased his grip—"He is a strange warrior who wields a mighty sword."

"A warrior?"

A tingle of excitement coursed through Drogo's veins. This had to be the man his father waited in hate for. It had to be Hawk!

"Quickly! Where is he?"

"Such information would be worth much to the right person?" Simon said cautiously but quickened his words at Drogo's gesture of

annoyance with his sword hilt. “Well, it didn’t make much sense. But as I hid in the bushes, I heard one of his men speak of a sanctuary.”

Drogo relaxed and a wintry smile flitted across his face.

“So he helps the sisters find my father’s ransom.” He looked thoughtfully at the slave-trader’s puzzled face. “Now, this must stay a secret between you and me.”

The last thing Simon wanted in this world was to be told the confidences of someone such as Drogo but the son of Voltan was bent on talking his thoughts out loud whether he, Simon, listened or not.

“Not only will I bring back the head of this Hawk, but I’ll have the gold as well. And then, Voltan, we’ll see who is the Lord of the Dance.”

He smiled inwardly. It had been a lucky happenstance for him to have met this greasy trader. Drogo blinked, more aware of Simon’s presence. But it certainly wouldn’t do for news of this to reach his father.

“You have done well,” Drogo said with a voice slick with oil. “And will be richly rewarded. But, first—”

Drogo put a conspiratorial arm around the trader’s shoulders to whisper in his ear while he drew his dagger stealthily and moved it under Simon’s ribs.

“—you must swear that you will tell no one of this chance remark you overheard.”

The ferrety-faced one started to swear his commitment but his mouth popped open wordlessly, his eyes glazed the moment the silvery steel snuck between his ribs and entered his heart. He lay in Drogo’s embrace While his killer whispered to him.

“Today is the day that Drogo comes of age, my father.”

# 15

## THE CONFLICT BEGINS

The chest of gold, once the cherished desire of Sped the Hunchback, late of the River Shale, rested on the altar table of the monastery and Sister Monica placed her hands tenderly on its aged, brittle leather covering. If there was a lingering dubiety as to how its acquisition had been accomplished, she banished the dot of doubt into a less analytical area of her mind.

"It is truly a miracle," she trilled happily to Ranulf. "Our Lady is saved."

"Not yet!" corrected the old warrior. "Hawk still believes that once the gold is given the Dark One will kill her."

"No, no!" Sister Monica rounded on him angrily. "He gave his word. We must trust him."

Her raised voice caused Hawk to leave his vigil at a small, grilled window and answer her misplaced sentiments.

"To trust him is to trust the devil himself," he told her in no uncertain terms. He made an all-embracing gesture to include the others. "We shall stay until the Abbess is safe."

Sister Monica's temple whitened.

"No!" she challenged him. "It will anger Voltan if he finds you here. You must go—"

"We stay!"

Hawk's rejoinder was brusque and a tear sparked in the sister's eye. She stormed past the men to the sanctuary of her cell.

"Our sister has great faith in Voltan's word," said Gort half apologetically after an embarrassed silence.

"One which she may live to regret," said an unrelenting Hawk.

He changed the subject abruptly.

"Baldin! Check if this place can be held against attack."

Hawk knew that the presence of him and his companions would eventually be made known to his brother, Voltan. His brother! The very term was anathema to him. But there had been a time when it hadn't been so; when his ambition was to have his brother acknowledge him as his peer; a time of riding together in the upland hills of Varenne, hunting the proud mountain stag.

Days and nights of fruitless search but with the distance of

recollection, furnishing a warmth of memories. The sweetsmelling smoke of spluttering juniper twigs; the tang of the mountain springs with their delicious coldness threatening to inebriate the senses at first sip; the comradeship of exhausted men whose reliance on one another was never in question. Then the day they held their quarry at bay. That had been the moment, the first questioning doubt of his brother's code of life.

They had hunted the great beast for six days. It had evidenced a manlike cunning the way it twisted and turned its pursuers with a nimble dexterity. But inexorably its great strength had been sapped and in the end it stood boldly against the mountain, the many branches of its antlers sweeping back and forth as it couched its head in defiance.

The bolt pierced its heart and it fell to its knees. A dreadful sadness rushed through Hawk. No! he wanted to scream. Such valiance should never be sullied by death. Who could have been so indifferent to the cry of destiny?

Voltan's hand still held the crossbow aimed at the beast's chest. His face was lifted in a smile of intensely satisfied delight and his eyes shone from some deep, inner catharsis.

"There is a small door at the back leading to the outside." Baldin had returned and his report nudged Hawk from his recollections. "Locked, it will hold against many men. The only other way in is as you can see—through the front doors. The builders of this place had an eye to defence, it seems."

Hawk nodded. His dark thoughts seemed to be a portent of some imminent threat and the feeling made him restless. He acknowledged what the dwarf had said but he needed some activity and decided to check it for himself.

Baldin perched himself on the edge of a table at which Gort was methodically cleaning his breastplate. Off to one side, Ranulf replenished his crossbow magazines with bolts and observed the dwarf draw out a pouch with an overt flourish which immediately caught the giant's eye. Baldin removed something from the bag and popped it ostentatiously into his mouth. He chewed slowly with infinite relish.

Gort harrumphed loudly and pressed on with his polishing. The dwarf smacked his lips, licked his fingers and poked in the bag for another tidbit.

It was too much for the giant.

"Always stuffing yourself, but never a thought of offering your comrades anything," he complained sourly.

The dwarf eyed him speculatively and adopted a slightly hurt look.

“Well—they’re rather special, that’s all,” he replied evasively.

“Special are they? Too good to share with a friend, are they?”

“No, it’s just—” said Baldin hurriedly, “—that dwarves seem to be the only ones who appreciate the flavour of—”

Gort snorted with indignation and grabbed the pouch.

“Are you insinuating that your people have better taste than mine?” he roared.

He groped in the bag and extracted a strange-looking “sweetmeat”. A jellied globule with a suspicious-looking hard blob, unwinking inside it.

Baldin watched placidly and, with more insouciance than he felt, Gort tossed the confection into his mouth.

“What are they?” he asked as he chewed. “Some kind of fruit?”

“Fruit, he says,” mimicked Baldin.

“Well, what then?”

Baldin shook his head bemoaning the big man’s ignorance. “These are the finest sugared turkles money can buy.”

“Turkles?” puzzled Gort.

“Yes, you lummox! Turkles!” the dwarf reiterated. “You know—what d’you call them? Lizard’s eyeballs!”

Gort’s jaws stuck in half travel, he clapped a hand to mouth, threw the pouch back at Baldin and hastened outside.

The dwarf hugged his knees, noticed Ranulf watching him and, sheep-faced, offered the pouch to him. Ranulf demurred with a firm shake of his head.

“Oh, you needn’t worry,” Baldin said with understanding. “They’re actually sugared nuts. But if I’d told longshanks that, this bag would be as empty as his head.”

Crow squatted on a plinth a stone’s throw from the entrance to the monastery. He listened intently, dividing the various sounds his sensitive ears picked up into categories which either demanded further examination or instant dismissal. For some time he had concentrated on a series of low muffled footfalls a few miles away in the distant forest. They developed into the measured tread of armed men and their advancing progress verified to the elf that their objective was the monastery. He slipped down from the stone pedestal and loped quickly over and into the church.

“Armed men moving towards us,” he said simply.

“How many?” queried Hawk, totally alert.

“A dozen!”

Sister Monica heard the exchange from the window of a cloister and

hurried to confront the men who prepared themselves for the coming combat.

"Please," she entreated Hawk. "Just give them the gold."

"If the Abbess is released, they shall have it." Hawk spoke wearily but gently. "You have my word. Now, tell your sisters to remain in their cells."

Hawk positioned himself in front of the altar facing the great double doors which he had purposely left unbarred. The others disposed themselves in the shadows and waited.

The doors of the church burst open. Twelve men stormed in and arranged themselves about their leader, Drogo. Contemptuously, he stepped down into the chapel interior, apparently opposed by one solitary man.

"That's far enough," said Hawk in a voice of spun steel. "State your business."

"You know my business. I am Drogo, son of Voltan! I come for the gold."

He looked past Hawk to the chest on the altar table, a mocking smile on his lips.

"The gold will be given when the Abbess is returned. Tell Voltan it is here waiting."

Drogo took another step nearer, his face stony.

"I did not make myself clear," snarled Drogo icily. "I came for the gold. I am no messenger, but I will give you a message."

He motioned his men forward, their faces eager for the kill.

"A message of death."

He lunged himself at Hawk.

The mindsword sparked to life and leapt into Hawk's hand. Green fire wreathed a helix about Drogo's sword and his charging blow cut through the empty space where Hawk had originally stood.

Drogo's men faced the full fury of Hawk's comrades. Arrows and crossbow bolts ripped from two angles of concealment and before they could comprehend what had happened, a whirlwind of death-dealing blows erupted on them from Gort's hammer. Those who survived the slamming were dealt with mercilessly by Baldin's cudgel as he darted from pillar to pillar, too small and too agile for the searching blades of the attackers.

A bearded bull of a man swathed his broadsword at Hawk but the thrust was deflected by the mindsword, the impetus of the lunge taking him beyond Hawk. He whirled a slice at the unprotected back but the bearer of the mindsword danced sideways and Hawk's driving cut severed bone and sinew.

Drogo had suffered a bone-jarring slit across his forehead and the blood poured down across his eyes. He slicked it away with the back of his hand.

The ghastly green of the mindsword beckoned Drogo scornfully.

Mindlessly, the son of Voltan shrieked venomous hate at Hawk, slashing blindly in all directions with berserker rage. He used his sword like a cleaver but he hardly felt the mortal blow which rent through his chest.

The tumult had boiled in the tight confines of the chapterhouse for what seemed an eternity but in reality had only endured for a trice.

Only two of Drogo's men still had the breath left in their bodies and Hawk bade them drop their weapons.

"Take him to Voltan." Hawk indicated the fallen Drogo whose tortured breaths racked his frame like the ague. "Tell him Hawk waits for the Abbess to be returned."

Sister Monica rushed in as Drogo was trailed from the church. The sight of the dying and the dead appalled her. She glared at Hawk with eyes which now saw him as contemptible as the other despoiler of churches. What difference was there between them? They all delighted in the ecstasy of killing.

Her revulsion prickled the hair on Hawk's neck. There was nothing he could ever say now that would wipe away her loathing for him and the knowledge weighed heavily on him.

"Why did you not give him the gold?" she cried. "That is all he wanted. Now you will bring the wrath of the Dark One on us all."

Hawk could find no words but Gort felt obliged to speak bluntly.

"He came for the gold and he also came for Hawk," he pointed out to her. "If he had got them your Lady would not have lived beyond the dawn and this church would have been burnt to the ground."

Sister Monica paid no heed to the giant and directed her words to Hawk.

"I asked you to give them the gold. They would have returned the Abbess and left us in peace."

There was an awkward silence and Crow, not normally one to speak, surprised everyone by responding, "The peace of the dead."

# 16

## THE FUNERAL PYRE

Voltan's steed thundered up the rising forest path which gradually widened like a funnel as it mounted towards the base of the rearing rocky eminence. The steep bluff of limestone shimmered before him but the blazing pain coursing the length of his face made his vision fragment into dancing scintillas of disconnected pictures.

His horse slowed its charging pace to a panting walk as the gradient grew too great and stopped altogether on the grassy clearing which lay like a carpet before the gaping blackness of the cave sundered in the face of the rocky scar.

He dismounted and entered the cave mouth which vibrated with an undulating redness. Almost at once he was swallowed up in the inky midnight.

The tall creature seemed suspended inside the grotto before a huge, concave, bioplasmic eggcell which pulsated throughout its organic sphere with the vermilion flush of living blood.

Voltan removed the grilled mask which hid his tortured face and faced the Black Wizard. The orbs within the hood focused on him.

"Has the one we seek—come?" asked the stridulous voice.

"Not yet," panted Voltan, swaying his head to and fro. "Hurry! The pain grows worse."

"The flesh does not heal. A strange malady affects the face. It is beyond all skill to render a permanent cure."

The hooded Wizard removed from the folds of his cloak the relief-giving crystal.

"Soon my tormentor will be within my grasp," gritted Voltan. "Then shall he endure double the pain I have suffered these long years."

"Steel yourself," hissed the creature. "The pain will be great."

A sudden blast of power erupted from the crystal and scorched Voltan's face, tearing a growling scream from his throat. White heat silhouetted his head and he collapsed into unconsciousness.

And in the floating darkness his recurring nightmare began. A flaming torch drove straight at his face and he could smell the blackening flesh burn. The white face of a woman bobbed in the murk, the beautiful profile of a beckoning fair one: which shattered and resolved itself into a screaming countenance falling away from

him, endlessly spinning. The flowing robes once pure and clean became besmirched by an ever-increasing blot of blood. It crimsoned from a central point like a whirlpool and in its eye a steel shafted arrow vibrated.

Eliane, he screamed soundlessly and the nightmare repeated itself.

He woke with a start.

The Black Wizard stood over him impassively.

"How long have I been like this?" Voltan asked in a thick voice.

"The effect of the crystal lasts longer each time," answered the spindly creature. "The sun has gone from the sky and will soon rise in the east."

Voltan rode into his encampment and the outlying guards snapped out of their loose stances at his passing. He paused in front of his pavilion and waited for Chak to take care of his horse.

Some commotion broke out on the far edge of the camp. Two men half-carried a third, threading through the small, smouldering fires and bivouac tents.

A coldness crept over Voltan when he recognised the injured man as Drogo. He indicated a rough trestle. The two warriors nervously lay his son upon it and retreated, hoping for anonymity.

Voltan looked down upon Drogo bleakly. His son's eyelids flickered wildly, then held his father's gaze.

"I wanted to …" Drogo's voice faltered and a tiny trickle of his life blood dribbled from the corner of his mouth. Each word was a hot tongue of fire. "… to prove myself … Hawk …"

Voltan gripped his son's shoulders.

"Hawk? Where?"

"He helps the nuns … the gold is in the church … I tried to …"

His eyes swivelled up into his head. Voltan felt the body sag and go slack. His son was dead.

"Dro—go!"

He pulled the two syllables out into a keening moan. It was a mixture of saddened loss and angry irritation.

Out of the corner of his eye he marked the two men and a new emotion eased the ache of his son's death. An emotion he understood and could endure with pleasure.

He turned away from Drogo's corpse.

"My son dies and yet you live," he began casually. "I find that strange."

The other warriors had heard this tone before and shrank back, leaving the two men in isolation.

“Give them weapons,” he signed to Chak. “It is fitting my son dies with dogs at his feet.”

The two men looked at one another unsteadily. They accepted the swords Chak thrust upon them with ill-concealed fear.

Voltan intentionally stood with his back to them. The swords hung loosely in their hands, watching, waiting, comparing glances with one another.

“Fight,” challenged Voltan, throwing away the conspicuous dagger from his belt. “Or you die where you stand.”

One of the men sneered and tightened the grip on his blade. His comrade was still unsure but gained courage from the other’s attitude. They widened the distance between them.

Voltan’s face was inscrutable but he listened intently to each minute sound. He knew the very instant that the first man made up his mind to strike. The stress of his footfall. Many times he had played this game and the excitement charged his body electrically.

With a swoop he plucked a concealed knife from a sheath at the top of his boot and hurled it sideways jumping splay-legged to face the second man.

The first man let out an *oof* of surprise, crumpled to the ground while he tried to prise the steel from his stomach. He never accomplished it and he was a long time dying.

“Has your courage deserted you so soon?” Voltan mocked the remaining man who had checked any thought of rushing Voltan.

Indeed, his head twitched with an uncontrollable palsy. He laid the sword down, making soundless noises of surrender.

“Pick it up!” hissed Voltan.

The man looked at his comrades of yesterday but found little solace there since they averted their eyes from his silent pleading.

“Pick it up!” screamed Voltan for the last time.

The man fled down a tunnel of men towards the safety of the forest.

Voltan held out a commanding hand and Chak placed a small javelin into it.

The fleeing man felt the thud in his back which tumbled him on to his knees. He pitched forward face down in the dirt, the javelin transfixing his body and pinning him to the ground.

“Prepare the rites for my son,” commanded Voltan of Chak.

Scudding clouds obscured the moon and intermittent beams of liquid silver rippled over the high funeral pyre. Atop the brushwood pile lay the corpse of Drogo, his arms crossed on his chest clasping his sword, its hilt tucked below his chin. At his feet, the two men stared

sightlessly into the night.

It had been built on a slight knoll and Voltan's men stationed themselves at some distance below it.

Voltan stood close to it, a flaming brand poised to set it alight.

A wind sprang up from nowhere and sent masses of dry leaves swirling about the open hillock.

He thrust the torch deep into the pyre and the gusting breeze fanned the fire quickly into a scorching blaze.

Voltan retreated from the heat to where Chak held his horse at the ready. Safely mounted, he viewed his son's pyre for the last time.

His son's pyre!

The greedy sparks leapt from the fiery furnace and the image of another conflagration superimposed itself on Voltan's mind.

Huts made of wattle and reeds incandesced and from one hovel, consumed with flames, issued the agonised cries of a man and woman.

A small boy crawled on the ground before it, calling endlessly for his mother and father. Warriors on horseback threatened to trample him underfoot until Voltan reached down from his saddle and swung him up on to his horse.

The reeking huts sent choking smoke in all directions.

"Father! Mother!" whimpered the boy.

Voltan shook the hysterical child.

"They are nothing. You obey me now," he shouted above the crackling din. "I am your father. Do you understand?"

The colour of the boy's hair was the colour of her hair. The wideness of eye had her candour. It could have been her child, he thought, but instantly dismissed it because of its impossibility.

His horse's trembling jolted Voltan from his introspection and he eased it further back from the smouldering air which eddied from the pyre. Without being observed he drifted off into the forest enclosure and was gone before any of his men noted his disappearance.

It took two hours to reach his destination.

He remained at the edge of the forest, in deep shadow.

"This is Voltan. I have words for you," he shouted across the intervening space between him and the monastery.

The door of the church inched open and the slight figure of Sister Monica appeared in the pale crack of light from within.

"I know you hide the one called Hawk behind your doors," he continued. "Hear me and hear me well. Tomorrow, when the moon is high, I shall return. Hawk and the gold will be given to me or you shall have your Lady back with her innards tied around her scrawny

neck and this place will be wiped from the face of the land."

As silently as he had come, he withdrew back into the lonely forest.

"Dammit," fulminated Ranulf. "I could easily have skirted round the edge of the wood and ended his black hearted life once and for all."

"Remember he still has the Abbess," countered Hawk. "As much as I desire an end to Voltan's life, the risk to the Lady of this Church is too great. But the die is now cast. The conflict really begins."

Sister Monica slammed the great doors.

"This is your fault," she cried with frustration. "We'll all die because you killed his son."

"There would have been no ransom gold if it hadn't been for Hawk," Ranulf flung back at her.

"And it should have been paid."

Sister Monica wrung her hands. She felt so helpless. It had become clear to her that these men were playing some ritualistic game of war and the naïve ones like herself and her sisters were mere spectators to be tolerated in the background.

The Abbess only existed as an excuse for conflict. There had to be another reason for the hatred which existed between Hawk and Voltan and the Lady Abbess was a useful pawn to contain it. How many times had other innocents been manipulated to give credence to an act of aggression? Somehow she would find a way to end this lunatic game of men.

"We must suffer because of your quarrel with this man," she accused him and flounced from his presence.

Hawk felt the accusation bite deep.

Somehow the original intention of championing the defence of good had leaked away; to be replaced with the need for revenge.

The sister was correct. While he and Voltan weighed up one another and prepared for the other's eventual death, outsiders who touched their lives did suffer.

And their ghosts would haunt the corridors of his mind forever.

He remembered Eliane.

# 17

ELIANE

He remembered Eliane.

Her gold spun hair falling down across lightly sloping shoulders.

About her brow was a thin band of gold filigree. Eyes wide and clear grey beneath a high, noble forehead. A delicately-shaped narrow nose. Mouth wide and generous.

She held her head proudly but not arrogantly. How she would have hated being termed arrogant!

He saw her again, waiting at the end of the laburnum grove at her father's house, racing to greet him the moment he passed beneath the great gates of Froy. The fair Eliane of Froy.

The sheen of her long, clinging, saffron chiton flowed from her shoulders over firm young breasts into a fold tucked under a gold rope belt about her tiny waist. It then fell free past narrow hips and thighs to envelop her lissome legs. Her small feet peeped below the hem, shod in soft buckskin.

The coolness of her mouth; the butterflies her lips traced on his face and body. The strength that lay in those slender brown arms which always surprised him when she wanted the embrace to go on.

So many things to remember from such a short time together …

Their wedding celebrations were in full swing. A merry tune was being played by a group of pipes and tabors and Hawk and Eliane led the dancers in a galliard. When it came their turn, she tightened her grip on his hand and skipped him out of the hall and into the garden.

The arbour in the laburnum grove was cool and quiet after the merriment in the hall. They kissed deeply with a peaceful langour.

"A fine thing for us to do on our wedding day," she scolded him. "The guests will wonder where we've gone …"

She tried to keep a straight face but his solemn expression made her laugh and kiss him again.

A shadow moved in the bushes and the tall figure who emerged made them move apart like guilty children.

"Voltan, my brother," called Hawk. "You are not enjoying the festivities?"

He tried to keep his tone light but he felt not a little annoyed that his brother had followed them and for what purpose?

Voltan stood there silent, his jaw working. Twice, during the ceremony, Hawk had caught sight of him and had thought at the time his brother had a rigid strangeness to him but had forgotten about it in the intricacies of the wedding ceremony. Now he realised that Voltan was biting back hot anger.

"How could I enjoy them?" Voltan exclaimed bitterly. "When these festivities should have been for *my* marriage to Eliane?"

"Eliane was never your betrothed," answered Hawk, taken aback slightly. "She had a free choice."

"While I fought alongside our father, you were here turning her love for me to hate with your silvery tongue."

Eliane was shaking her head in disbelief. She moved between the two brothers.

"You and I were friends. Nothing more," she said as carefully as possible. "I love your brother as he loves me."

She raised a tentative hand towards Voltan. "Cannot you find happiness in your heart for our marriage?"

For the first time, Voltan looked at her directly and she was unprepared for the naked desire she saw in his eyes.

"No! No!" He seized her wrist and his grasp was meant to hurt. "You were mine—and shall be again."

Abruptly, he let her hand fall and retreated a few steps. "Take care, little brother." He riveted his eyes on Hawk. "Watch for me in the night."

With that he turned on his heel and swept away savagely through the bushes.

Eliane clung tightly to Hawk.

"He has changed and it frightens me." She shuddered in his arms. "His mind has turned in on itself."

She unlooped a crucifix from around her neck. It was cunningly wrought in wood and gold enamel with a prominent boss on the crosspiece, carved in the shape of a rose. She hung it around Hawk's neck.

"Wear it. It will protect you."

He studied the cross knowing what she meant and buried his face in her sweet-smelling hair.

Voltan's words hung in the air bleakly. It would never be the same again, Hawk realised. The green years were all gone. There would always be the hidden bond of brotherhood binding them in some way but their friendship had been irreparably broken.

The day ended and velvet night breathed upon the two lovers as

they lay under the stars, drowsy in the evening vale of summer. Eliane lay in the crook of his arm and he listened to their soft breathing, remembering the softness of their first kisses and the wildness of their last. He drew in the warm odours which rose from her body and wished he could sleep this way forever.

"Now we are as one, my love," she whispered and lifted her hand to his mouth.

He kissed the petals of her fingertips lingeringly as if each one might be for the last time.

Their time together was drawing to a close did they but know it: the days at their hunting lodge by the lake.

A messenger brought word to Hawk from his father. The news was bad and depressed him.

"My father worries at the reports from the North," he told her after they had walked in silence along the shore of the lake. "Dark forces are moving and the country is being put to the torch. Soon we may be defending our own lands."

"My love, if there is to be fighting, then my sword will stand by yours."

He held her defiant face between his hands.

"Brother may fight brother," he told her softly.

"Voltan?"

"He has joined *them,"* he answered bleakly. "The stories they tell of him are past all belief. What happened to him?"

"The darkness was always there within him, my love," she comforted him.

Hawk poled the small boat back across the lake to their intimate bivouac shelter on the far bank. Dusk brought a tiny chill and Hawk conjured up a warming fireglow. The rustle behind the tent caught Eliane's attention.

The scream froze on her lips. Hawk only heard the sharp snap of a crossbow string. The bolt caught him in the upper shoulder. Light cascaded about him. Eliane's frozen scream thawed and swept about him, then a black rushing shape he dimly recognised as the outline of a crossbow arced at his temple and darkness sucked him down into a pit of hell—

—filled with Eliane's screams and walled around with faces made of fire which revolved about him like some macabre reel danced by demons.

Time ebbed and flowed.

The spinning rondelay slowed, the face separated from the redness, became the wildly grinning face of his brother, Voltan, dragging to

him a struggling Eliane.

Beside them the early evening fire sparked as their churning feet flicked dust fragments into it.

The bolt in his shoulder had sucked the energy from him and his attempts to raise his head and focus threatened to make him lose consciousness from nausea. His feeling of impotence only magnified his anguish.

“The next one will send you to hell, little brother.” Voltan’s voice pierced the haze and Hawk saw him aim the crossbow with his free hand. “And what sweet revenge to tell our whining, peace-loving father about your death. Then will he heed my bidding.”

Voltan drew Eliane closer to him and she struggled against his physical nearness.

“Look well, Hawk,” he gloated. Behind him the setting sun made a burnished mirror of the lake. “The last thing you will ever see is the woman you love in my arms.”

“I will still be his,” Eliane cried, heavy with hatred. “For I would rather be his than have your snake hands touch me. I loathe each breath that keeps you alive.”

He hit her vindictively with the back of his hand, sprawling her by the fire.

Hawk flexed his chest but the rope which tethered him to the tree was inflexible. The movement uncovered the crucifix about his neck and the reflection of the sinking sun shafted directly from it into Voltan’s face as he prepared to fire the final arrow.

It had a strange effect on Voltan. He faltered, branded by the distorted glare of the image, unsure of his next act. Disoriented, he did not see until too late Eliane seize a burning brand from the fire and plunge it directly into his face.

The oily resin stuck, smeared from the oozing torch and bubbled like ignited sulphur.

He fell to the ground, snarling like an animal, his hands clawing, tearing, gouging the smoking tar deep into the flesh.

Like a fiery stake it had cauterised the eyesocket and the ball of the pupil had disintegrated with a fizzing slurp.

Eliane burned through her bonds on the embers of the fire, seized a cutting knife from in front of the tent lodge to free Hawk.

He was weaker than a child and they staggered and fell, clambered into the safety of the small boat in which they had day-dreamed on the lake so lyrically a lifetime, it seemed, ago. Eliane poled the boat frantically away from shore.

Voltan fired the crossbow, incoherent with pain.

Hawk felt Eliane suddenly grow rigid as the shaft hit home, guided by some evil nemesis. The pole fell from her hands and the boat, out of control, was caught by a draught of current which swung the vessel out into the middle of the lake and thence to the far side of the sheet of water.

The boat rocked on a sandy beach for a long time before Hawk summoned up sufficient strength to wrest the stricken Eliane ashore. He knelt on the ground, clasping her gently in his arms.

"I will ride for help," he said softly.

Her hand squeezed his weakly. "No, beloved … there is not time."

Each furrow of pain which lined her face caused him unbearable anguish.

"Voltan goes to destroy your father … You must go …"

Her voice became so faint he could hardly hear her whispers.

"Eliane—I cannot leave you."

His mind shut down. He wanted time to cease and so let him alter the course of events; to relive a different chain of occurrences. But the reality remained.

Eliane's face had the lustre of sleep lying upon it.

They had been as man and wife for only five short days.

What kind of perverted destiny could take the life of someone as vibrant as she?

# 18

VOLTAN'S CAMP

Ranulf cleared his throat loudly. Hawk had slipped into one of his dark broodings and was oblivious of people and things around him.

"Don't think too badly of her," Ranulf counselled gruffly and for a moment Hawk was caught between two realities, thinking the veteran was talking about Eliane. With a wrench which always left him with a panicky feeling in his stomach, he realised Ranulf meant Sister Monica.

"She's only frightened and confused," the older man said.

Gort nibbled at a rind of cheese, extracting the very last edible portion from it. He cocked his eye back and forth from Ranulf and Hawk. The young Lord didn't seem to be in a talkative mood and the hanging silence was heavy with a sense of despair.

"She blames you for our coming," he cautioned Ranulf.

The veteran shrugged it off. "I know."

Night had fallen and the main chapter of the monastery was shadowy, lit in tiny pools of light by a few, guttering candles atop an iron sconce. The good sisters had taken themselves to their cells, leaving the men to use the main part of the chapel.

"What now?" asked Crow suddenly in his strange, lilting voice.

Hawk roused himself to answer the elfin bowman but his heart was still filled with an aching loneliness.

"Voltan will kill the Abbess, as he says, and will not stop from razing this place to the ground even if I were to give myself up. To try and fight would be futile. He has too many men."

A gloomy hush followed his solemn words, filled only by their own breathing.

Gort finished the red wine, cupped the earthenware mug in his big hands.

"If you're getting stung by wasps," he said as a complete *non sequitur,* chuckling to himself at the thought of what he was going to suggest, "you can either cover up your head or you can search out their nest and destroy it."

He underlined the final part by crushing the empty mug into powdery fragments.

Hawk took stock of the big man's words. His moody indecision was

lifting and he was finding solace in action.

“Then let us find ourselves a wasps’ nest and bring the odds in our favour.” The others were rousing themselves from their own self-induced lethargy. “Crow, go and find the woman. Tell her that I need her help once more. We shall meet before dawn where the road south enters the Great Wood.”

“Woman, we need the use of your magic,” Hawk greeted Meena.

The first pale light of day streaked the eastern sky above the vista of trees which stretched as far as the eye could see: Great Wood, the territory of Voltan.

They tethered their horses in a safe place and proceeded on foot into the dimness of the tangled thicket. The forest loomed above them, sometimes opening out for a breath of fresh air into a clearing. A brook was near by and they traced their steps along the lightly running water’s edge.

There was an ominous quiet lying over the woods and somewhere a lone bird called its solitary song. A wind hurried the leaves this way and that.

Meena, though sightless, led them, picking her way over the terrain unerringly.

They all found themselves listening intently for something, anything lurking deep within the sleeping woodland, shadows between the trees. All was silent. They came upon a glade, a secret place of the mouldering dead.

Burial stones crumbled at crazy angles and ancient mounds had been dug up savagely at some time in the past: whether by hands long dead or wild animals was immaterial. They moved on into the thicket ahead.

A sharp wind with pointed teeth snarled among the less dense parts of the forest but died to a whimper in the deep stillness of the towering pines.

Meena stopped and raised her hand.

“The camp is up ahead. I cannot tell how many guards there are,” she said. “I shall prepare my powders.”

She unhooked a leather purse at her waist.

Crow, on a signal from Hawk, loped softly ahead. Before him reared an enormous beech tree. Without changing his stride, he launched himself on a prodigious leap upwards. His moccasined feet seemed to brush against the bark and propel him up on to a high branch.

He could now descry Voltan’s encampment.

A few desultory bivouacs led in increasing numbers towards a large

pavilion tent. Here and there the embers of the night's fires sent weedy streamers of smoke skywards. Two guards leaned on their pikes, eyes heavy lidded with sleep. Elsewhere, horses moved restlessly, tethered to the nearest available branch.

Crow called down softly to Hawk.

"There is no sign of the Abbess," he said and prepared his bow for the signal to attack.

"She must be there," concluded Hawk.

"I am ready," said the woman, laying her potions of powders on the ground before them. "The magic will not last long but will gain you a little time."

She set the end of her staff against the magic mixture. It licked out a tongue of blue, curling flame which ignited the powder silently. A cone of smoke twisted up instantaneously from the detonation and, filled with its own devilish life, shot out tentacles of vapour towards the sleeping encampment.

The two guards started in amazement at the weird billowing carpet of smoke which had come from nowhere. Two arrows arced overhead, unseen and unheard by them until they vibrated deeply in their chests. One guard dropped immediately but the other let out an eldritch scream of death which had the camp scrambling to life.

Crow leapt down from the tree as easily as he had ascended and, together with Hawk, Gort, Baldin and Ranulf, dashed through Meena's mist amongst the tents, their goal to reach the pavilion of Voltan and rescue the Abbess.

Horses screamed and reared.

A warrior smote at Hawk but it was a weak blow. Hawk's blade whined down and took off the unfortunate man's right arm at the shoulder.

Swords screamed around the smoke.

Gort charged into camp, hotly chasing three men. He used his hammer like a battering ram, driving them before him like sheep. Like a sprite in the fog, Baldin leapt from waggon to waggon and cracked their heads with his trusty cudgel. A wink passed between giant and dwarf.

Weapons lashed out at Ranulf but his crossbow spluttered a spray of red bolts which maimed and killed. And when his clip of bolts was empty he used his weapon like a club and belaboured the first raging brute into insensibility with a backhand blow.

Cloven metal, the clangour of smiting, rent flesh and the hawk-scream of the mighty mindsword.

Hawk pushed furiously towards the large pavilion. Sword met

sword in a shower of sparks. A guard pressed close to smash at his head. Hawk leaned sideways and with a whirling cut almost hewed the man in half.

He sprang through the canvas flap into the pavilion with Ranulf in close attendance.

Voltan crouched by an iron cage, a glinting knife at the throat of the imprisoned Abbess.

“One more step and her throat will be slit,” he threatened.

They stood there, the two brothers, the hate bubbling in the deadlock between them.

Ranulf came up behind Hawk.

“The smoke thins, we must go,” he shouted urgently. “We have done enough!”

He pulled a reluctant Hawk back out and into the ever increasing clatter of weapons.

Crow harvested men, cutting them down with a white wind of arrows. He and Gort gave the five cover to retreat from the battle’s din. The giant revolved his mighty hammer and had Voltan’s men backing up in disorder.

But as Meena’s smokescreen lifted, the odds began to tilt heavily in favour of the enemy. A final furious exchange of arms and Hawk’s men escaped into the fastness of the surrounding forest.

There was no sign of Meena as they raced to recover their horses and head for the refuge of the monastery. She did things in her own mysterious way, thought Hawk. No doubt she would be there when the next emergency arose. That it would arise he had no doubt.

Back at the chapel of the sisters, their wounds were tended by the anxious nuns.

Gort had collected three broken shafted arrows which had pierced his armour but had only punctured his flesh a little. He grinned at the lissome Crow who had escaped unharmed.

Ranulf had been cut about the face and he nursed a fairly nasty gash on his thigh.

When it came to ministering to the dwarf, he appeared the worst injured of all. But several bathings of his “wounds” revealed that the congealed blood which gave him a gory aspect was, in fact, that of his enemies.

Hawk had only suffered minor cuts on his forearm and was relieved that his tiny force had come out of the battle as unscathed as they had done. They may not have succeeded in setting the Abbess free but they had inflicted considerable casualties to Voltan’s army of louts.

“They will come soon enough,” he warned his companions. “Let us

rest. This is where the final struggle will be."

Sister Monica heard this statement. She knew its implications. It was obvious to her that these fighting men had forgotten why they had been asked to come here. The only thing they thought about now was the next battle and the tales of strength they could boast about in the aftermath.

She waited for them to settle down for their evening meal.

Baldin took his platter of food and placed himself on the sill of a mullioned window. He cut slivers from an apple, chewed them pensively but did not notice Sister Monica slipping out the side door of the monastery and skirt around the church to be swallowed up in the darkness of the forest.

Voltan brooded in front of a brazier which gave out sufficient body warmth but did little to lift the icy fury his whole being felt for his enemy, Hawk. But even in this passion a part of him urged caution.

Hawk was not alone. From the reports of his men Voltan had sketches of those who fought by his brother's side. A motley lot but highly dangerous as opponents.

Yet something or someone was missing.

There had been magic or sorcery at work this morning and that was something which struck cold dread in Voltan's heart.

He had been promised power by those who called themselves the Black Wizards. In return he swore allegiance to their cause—the downfall of the old Order, its replacement with Chaos and finally the rising of a new dynamism which would subjugate and control the disassociated fragments of struggling humanity.

Then would his star be in the ascendancy. No longer would he be just the master of an army of marauders in some backwater but lord of a continent feared and answerable to no one.

He sat alone save for the encaged Abbess.

"Who helps him, old woman?" He asked of her but expected no answer. "He uses some power unknown to mortals. Something gives him strength."

"God never shows Himself to man, my son," said the Abbess. "But His Power manifests itself in ways which are mysterious to us."

"This is no spiritual power, woman," he growled. "There is no invisible God. Strength is here and can be seen. The gods I follow stand before me and reveal their might to me. They are not like your puny charitable fool of a godhead fit only for beggars and weaklings."

"Then why do you fear my God?"

"I do not fear, old woman. I despise those who would follow blindly

a mindless promise of glory in a world the dead inhabit. What I do fear is the manifestation of unknown power, of some secret sorcery which I can see but cannot touch."

"You talk in riddles. I am a simple woman of God. To me there is only good and evil; a simple choice between two courses of action—one which will inflict pain or suffering and one which will alleviate it."

"Thus do you conclude your judgements of us all," mocked Voltan.

A commotion broke loose without the tent and Chak entered pushing a cowled figure before him.

It was Sister Monica.

"Why have you come?" Voltan asked her indifferently.

"I have a plan that will gain you the ransom … and Hawk," Sister Monica rushed the words emotionally. "I ask only that you spare the Abbess and the church."

"Sister, I forbid you to speak further," interrupted her superior.

"I must," answered Sister Monica brazenly. "Your life and the church are all that matter."

"The end cannot justify the means."

"Then let tomorrow be the judge of my actions," replied Sister Monica dully.

"Enough!"

Voltan signified, by a wave of the hand, that he desired no further argument. He leaned towards the sister.

"Tell me the plan!"

A little nun replaced a spluttering, dying candle in a hollowed niche, kneeled in obeisance and withdrew to the cloister.

Hawk and Crow lay against a pillar, facing away from one another. They had tended to their weapons and now let the solitude of the place creep over them.

"We have sat waiting like this many times before," said Crow. "Sometimes I tire of the fighting and the killing. At night, I hear the call of my race. They wait for me. Once I join them we will be forgotten."

Hawk pondered on the elf's words. He could understand his feelings. Often he felt himself to be the last of his kind. He had lost so much that was dear to him. So when he answered Crow he was also attempting to dispel his own apathy.

"No, Crow, your people will never be forgotten, nor will Gort's or Baldin's. They were here long before the race of men came and

brought their wars and diseases amongst you. And their legends will remain long after men have left the land."

While they talked, Sister Monica crept back into the monastery, her absence undetected. Her timing was fortunate because a moment later Baldin, in checking the doors, found the one she had used still open and barred it tight.

"All is secure," he informed Hawk. "It would take a thousand men to enter here."

The dwarf yawned, saw a promising spot to sleep and tucked himself up against the giant's ample and soft stomach, patting the paunch to make a pillow.

"Gort!" commanded Hawk. "Take the first watch."

The giant sighed, raised himself and sent the newly-settled Baldin sprawling against a cold and unyielding wall. Gort spread his hands in mock apology and the dwarf, with a scowl and a grunt, turned away, curled up in a ball soon to be snoring as if to show how little a soft bed mattered.

Ranulf had found a nook close to the altar. His crossbow he placed across his middle. Exhaustion flooded through his limbs after the excitement and dash of the morning's affray and he was quickly asleep.

Their conversation at an end, Crow sat cross-legged, his head drooped, eyes closed. The amount of energy he had expended in the battle made him particularly vulnerable and sleep would quickly replenish his resources.

Beside him, Hawk took a long time to sleep. An uneasiness bore away at him as he drowsed but when he examined it closely he could find nothing to substantiate the feeling. Eventually he slept.

Gort stood by the great double doors, his hands resting on the shaft of his mighty hammer. He looked round at his sleeping companions with affection. A small sound had his eyes straining to peer into the passageway which led to the good ladies' cells.

In the shadows, Sister Monica emptied a cachet of powder into a jug of spiced ale, shook it and, calming her turbulent face, walked in to the chapel.

"To warm you against the night air," she whispered.

Gort accepted the gift, sniffing it appreciatively.

"Beer!" he said conspiratorially. "And by the smell of it, a fine brew. My thanks, sister; you and your ladies have been most generous."

He licked his lips and raised the foaming ale to his mouth. The entire draught disappeared in one mighty swallow which even surprised Sister Monica when the empty jug was returned to her.

“Excellent!” Gort smacked his lips.

For a moment nothing happened. Then the giant’s eyes revolved up into his head and ever so slowly he slid down the wall to lie collapsed and unconscious.

Sister Monica unbarred the main door as silently as possible.

# 19

## A HERO DIES

The sword blade glittered an inch from Hawk's throat.

Some sixth sense made the young lord awaken to find the figure of Voltan looming over him. A sidelong glance quickly told him that his companions were similarly taken unawares. The church was thronged with Voltan's men, expressions of gloating triumph marked on their faces.

"Great warrior you may be, but against so many swords at your throat I fear the fight would be short."

Voltan couched his sword across his breast.

The mindsword, thought Hawk. But his position was hopeless. Even that mighty blade would avail him naught.

His seeking eyes made Voltan smile. He thought his younger brother sought out his watchman, the giant, who even now was still in a half-drugged state.

"A little help from the good sister here," nodded Voltan in her direction.

Her treachery was beyond Hawk's capacity to understand and he threw her a hard, questioning glance but she averted her gaze.

"Tie them all up," Voltan ordered. His time of revenge was almost upon him but he wanted to eke it out, savour it lingeringly before devouring it in one climactic moment.

The savage way his men lashed Hawk and his comrades to separate pillars gave the sister pause to reflect that she had committed a dreadful mistake.

"I kept my side of the bargain." She tugged fruitlessly at Voltan's cloak. "You said no blood would be spilt inside the church."

Voltan turned to her. He despised her traitorous actions and it showed on his face.

"Unfortunately you will not live long enough to realise your mistake."

The dagger whispered from his belt and he pulled her on to the blade. She fell back on his supporting arm with a tiny, faint cry. He cleaned the knife redly on her robe.

Two warriors bore her from the monastery, her death already forgotten as Voltan turned to face the bound Hawk.

“First you took the woman I loved. Then you slew my son.”

He fired the dagger which had killed Sister Monica into the trestle table beside him where it vibrated with an awful thud.

“Your death will be slow and painful as will be your friends’. You shall know what I have suffered through the years with a face that no woman would look upon—forcing me to take another man’s child to call my own.”

Voltan stood before his brother, his voice at shouting pitch.

“You say you loved Eliane,” Hawk tried to keep his voice level but strong emotion glinted through. “And yet you killed her.” He swore at his elder brother. “You killed our father.”

Voltan could not bear the thrust in Hawk’s voice and struck him across the mouth.

“Enough!”

He drew in a deep breath. He had nearly killed Hawk then and there. But it would have been too easy. And too quick. There was all the time in the world for him.

“Where is the gold?”

“Where you will never find it,” hissed Hawk.

“Dear brother, I think you and your friends can be persuaded to tell me.”

“They don’t know. Only I can tell you where it is.”

“Well, then,” Voltan gestured at Hawk’s friends. “They shall watch you suffer, and when I’m finished, they shall accompany you down the river of death. Fetch me fire,” he ordered of his followers. And, turning to some cowering nuns Chak had shepherded in from the hidden cloister, “Bring all the wine and food from your stores, counters of beads. I have thirsty work ahead.”

Chak underlined the order with a sharp sideways movement of his head and the nuns scurried to their kitchen.

Meanwhile Voltan, enjoying himself, inspected the other prisoners.

“Little man with pointed ears,” he mocked Crow. “I shall trim them for you later.”

The elf spat down at his feet. His expression never changed.

Voltan poked Gort in the belly much to the obvious glee of his watching men. This was fine entertainment.

“The giant! Felled by a pinch of powder. You shall give us great sport before you die.”

“I shall give you a crushed head if I get my hands free,” bellowed Gort unbowed, but Voltan made a dismissive gesture with his gauntleted hand.

He looked at Ranulf with recognition.

"We have met before," he murmured dangerously. "That time I let you live. You used your second life well, fetching my saintly brother. Now—"

He seized Ranulf's stump and squeezed the injured member, grinning all the while.

"—you are of no further use to me."

The veteran tried to disguise the pain he felt and his stoicism irritated Voltan into one final crushing crunch which almost broke the veteran's impassiveness.

"And the dwarf," said Voltan contemptuously, pointing down at Baldin. This caused a ripple of merriment. "You should never have been allowed to dig yourself out of the earth."

A gale of laughter burst from his men.

"Fetch the Abbess," pronounced Voltan. "It is fitting that such a holy woman be present to give them absolution before they die."

Chak chose a squad of men. Without further bidding they set off to the secret place the Lady Abbess had been left at in the event of another surprise attack by Hawk.

A brazier of red-hot coals was set before Voltan, a poker already deep in its fiery belly.

"See how it glows, brother. Soon you will feel its touch and together we shall seek out the hiding place of the gold."

Voltan drew the glowing rod of iron from the coals with his gloved hand, neared Hawk and let the white-hot tip touch his brother's leather belt. The smell of the burning hide was acrid in Hawk's nostrils and the heat even penetrated through his chain-mail shirt to scorch his skin.

"Leave him, skull face! I can tell you where the gold is hidden."

Baldin's voice took both Voltan and Hawk by surprise. Hawk watched, puzzled.

"Speak then, misshapen one," growled Voltan going over to him.

Baldin muttered something which was totally inaudible to anyone in the church.

"Where?"

Voltan had to crouch down to place his helmeted head close to the dwarf's lips.

Suddenly Baldin lashed out with both his feet and kicked at the iron wolf's head.

Voltan screamed in agony at the lancing pain. Staggering blindly, he grovelled by the trestle table, groaning and clutching at things about

him. His hand closed on the dagger he had thrown there. With a howl of revenge he jerked it out and ran at the dwarf, plunging it deep into his chest.

A cry of anguish burst from Hawk's lips although Baldin had uttered not a word.

"Voltan! You will die by my hand," swore Hawk close to insanity.

But Voltan could not hear him for the tearing torment crushing his head.

"Guard them," he screamed, rushing blindly from the monastery.

The nuns had re-entered with platters of food and pitchers of wine and the embarrassment of Voltan's men at their leader's weakness was forgotten in the rush to swill their stomachs with the wine and food.

Without Voltan's discipline to strike fear into them they behaved like brawling mercenaries who felt themselves the equal of any man.

As they got progressively drunker and more drowsy, only one man remained sober enough to stand guard. He tested the prisoners' bonds. Baldin let out a weak sigh as his ropes were prodded.

"He still lives," whispered Hawk to Gort. "We must get free."

Voltan swayed in front of the Black Wizard.

"Quick, the crystal!" he screamed. "The pain is great."

But the tall, hooded creature would not be hastened.

"Has he been found?" it queried.

"Yes! Yes!" gasped Voltan. "He dies this very night. The pain! Quickly!"

The Wizard raised the healing crystal.

Gort strained on the ropes but his captors had bound him tight, trussed like a chicken.

"Mine are as immovable as yours," he said softly to Hawk.

"If we are not free of these bonds before Voltan returns we will not see tomorrow's sun …"

Hawk's voice trailed to nothing because something had caught his eye.

Voltan's men sprawled everywhere in the chapel, snoring, snorting loudly from the heavy wine they had consumed. The one guard, armed with a billhook, stood by the great double doors, his mouth agape.

The massive wooden bar which kept the doors tight shut was rising slowly from its bolts and floated free of the doors altogether. Slowly they creaked open. A black rod poked through the crack and the guard

inched forward suspiciously, the billhook raised in anticipation of attack. Of a sudden the rod emitted a crackle of energy which blinded the guard. A spinning web of green filaments engulfed the man until he was imprisoned in a strait-jacket of finely-spun, steel-like fibres.

The door opened further and the cloaked figure of Meena drifted in. Surefooted, though blind, she slipped through the soused sleepers straight to Hawk.

"You have need of my help, Lord."

"Thank God you've been looking in your fire of magic, mother," Hawk acknowledged as she cut his bonds.

"Go quickly!" she urged.

He raced to free his comrades who claimed their weapons as silently as possible.

"Voltan's men return with the Abbess."

Gort tenderly lifted the shallow breathing body of Baldin in his arms, carried him from the church.

"The Dark One will not be at his ministerings long."

She snapped her fingers creating an aureola of light to circle wider and wider like the ripples on a pool. It clung for an instant around the sleeping men before vanishing.

"They will dream a little longer to give us time to get our friend, the dwarf, to a place of safety."

The early morning air chilled their breaths. They waited in silence as Meena stretched her hands over the body of Baldin as he lay upon a soft bed of ferns.

Gort suffered most of all. He tried to suppress the tears of sadness but his compassionate spirit was too strong and they rolled down into his beard.

"Even my arts cannot save him," sighed a dejected Meena. "He waits at the gate of death."

They all kneeled by the stricken dwarf. Their presence seemed to give him a last, despairing surge of energy. His eyes flickered open.

"I am sorry," he apologised, "not to be with you for the final fight."

His voice faltered. Hawk's jaw tightened whitely.

"I die as I wanted." Baldin's voice took on a strength and resonance beyond what was possible for someone so far gone. "Among my friends …"

His eyes shone brightly for an instant then the light in them clouded until all lustre was gone.

Baldin was dead but the mischievous smile was there still to be seen on his now still face.

With heavy hearts they built a cairn of rocks upon him. Meena, by her magic, fused the rock into a solid cocoon.

“This will protect him from beasts who would disturb it,” she said. “The dwarf shall sleep peacefully.”

“What now, Hawk?” asked Ranulf in a vengeful voice.

Hawk counted the cost. Another life he cherished was gone. How many would die before Voltan paid the price of destiny?

“I go to avenge our friend and repay a debt long overdue,” he stated in a voice as hard as granite.

Gort gripped his hammer more tightly while Crow nodded his assent. The giant would smash the universe itself if it helped assuage the awful loss which burdened his heart so heavily.

Ranulf primed his crossbow.

“How do we get back into the church?” he wanted to know.

“I shall give you the way,” Meena said confidently.

They retraced their steps back to the monastery. It lay in silence like a mausoleum of the dead. Whose epitaph would eventually be written on the tomb would become known before the day was much older.

# 20

## THE FINAL CONFLICT

Chak knew something was wrong and approached the monastery carefully. He signalled to some of his squad of men to fan out, bidding a four-man guard remain with their hostage, the Lady Abbess.

Alone, he scouted around the church. He quickly ascertained that Voltan was still in control of the church but of Hawk and the other prisoners there was no sign. Puzzled by this development he marched his men openly into the monastery.

Voltan waited stony-faced.

By the door was a strange sight. Solidified in a translucent green stone was the dim outline of a man, his features barely recognisable through the solid green resinous material.

"Bar the door," commanded Voltan. "And bring the woman to me."

Chak did his bidding. Voltan would tell him what had happened in his own good time.

"Some sorcery was needed to free Hawk," smouldered Voltan. To have had his hated enemy within his grasp only to lose him was more than he could bear.

"Let us hunt him like a wild animal," suggested Chak. "We still have sufficient men …"

Voltan stopped his flow of words.

"No!" He rejected the idea. "To save the Abbess he will have to come here. We will prepare for his coming." He gave his man the necessary orders.

Some of the nuns were made to stand on an altar table, hands tied behind their backs. Callously a noose of rope was placed about their necks straining upwards to the rafter beams. One man standing guard could easily kick away the table and hang the trembling sisters like condemned criminals. It was an idea Chak found much to his liking.

"I beseech you," pleaded the Abbess kneeling before the seated Voltan. "Do not do this heinous thing. Release my sisters."

Voltan's hand clenched and unclenched on the hilt of his sword.

"If Hawk is not in my hands by dawn they will die and I will tear this sanctuary down, stone by stone. Pray hard, woman, that he may hear you."

Hawk studied the monastery from the safe distance of a clump of bushes. Beside him the woman prepared another of her powder mixtures. They were all waiting for something.

A brown shadow flitted from tree to tree. Suddenly it materialised amongst them. Crow had made a quick survey and described what he saw within the church. His tidings brought a flush of anger to their faces. That Voltan would string innocents up was the work of the devil incarnate.

"Woman," muttered Hawk. "I pray that your magic powders will work another miracle."

"Have no fear," Meena said. "The power of my sorcery will not harm you. But for a short time I will create a whirlpool of flying fireballs to blind their eyes."

The point of her staff incandesced the laid out powder and again a cone of white vapour reared from the ground. But this time sparking dots of light swam in the motes of mist. The whirling vortex condensed from a gaseous thing into a maelstrom of white crystals and excited coloured hail. With a whoosh it rushed at the massive double doors.

There was a stupendous roar. An explosive force ripped the great doors back on their hinges. Voltan's men fell back in disorder.

A fury of snow aflame with blazing firebolts streamed into the chapel with gale-like ferocity. The balls of energy struck at the warriors like molten bullets, searing through metal, leather, bone and tissue. But some power turned their course when they threatened any of the nuns noosed and so vulnerable.

Hawk, Gort, Crow and Ranulf hurtled in through the open doorway. Avenging phantoms who hewed, smote, ripped, arrow-pierced from the very heart of the dazzling blizzard.

Shafts, bolts, sped through the murk. Will-o'-the-wisps amidst the spindrift plucked the life away before a man could draw his sword.

But Voltan's warriors smote back.

The mindsword glowed an eerie green in the blanket of white. It buried itself in the neck of a screaming berserker. As he fell another appeared to take his place. Gort hammered him to perdition.

On Hawk's right, Ranulf triggered off a round of arrows which caught one lout full in the face. Blood spouted from the bristling bolts.

Clumsy thrusts came at Hawk from all sides but the mindsword darted this way and that like a deadly green-eyed snake. All the while Voltan remained in the background.

"Take the Abbess," he screamed to her guardians above the din. "I may yet need her."

Four men bundled the poor woman towards the small side door.

"Hawk!" bellowed Ranulf who had seen the action and exposed himself needlessly to danger. "The Abbess—they're taking her …"

He froze in mid sentence.

Chak, with unerring aim, sent his throwing knife at the veteran's back.

Slowly, Ranulf pivoted. Dammit, he thought incongruously. He'd been warned often enough what happened to volunteers. The half smile stayed on his face when he fell and died.

But his words had not been in vain.

Hawk, realising he would never hack his way through the throng, retreated to the main entrance to cut off the abduction of the Abbess.

He slashed at those between him and the door. They fell aside, several badly hurt, and he won through.

Gort's hammer toppled three men. He attacked with gale force.

Elsewhere, Crow kept up a rain of white-shafted death until his quiver was emptied. He did not flinch as two swords hummed towards him and cut him down.

Holding the hammer broadwise, the giant slammed three men against the wall, breaking their backs with the impact.

A bearded redhead grasped the opportunity to rush at Gort's unprotected back but one nun, the little cherubic-faced one, screamed out danger and threw herself between the giant and his assailant.

The sword thrust killed her instantly.

Gort seized the assassin with one hand, lifted him three feet off the ground. He strangle-shook him as a dog would a rat and hurled him broken-necked across the chapel.

Completely forgetting his own protection, the giant kneeled by the fallen figure of the little nun.

"Little lady," he wept, cradling her broken figure in his arms.

His head drooped in sadness, oblivious of the dark figure looming behind him.

With a flat-bladed blow of his sword, Voltan sent the giant reeling into unconsciousness.

The four guards dragged the Abbess from the side door. A strange flash of green halted their dash.

Hawk blocked their path.

There was a moment of indecision. Then they made a concerted rush.

Swords screamed at Hawk. His own blade sang, burned through one

man's shoulder to the heart.

Parry and block.

The three remaining guards snarled and grunted. Fear rode on their shoulders but still they fought, recklessly.

Hawk's sword flew in a blur that spewed blood from two men. The last man hewed thrusts and swipes to no avail. His rushing stampede ended with a clean slice from the mindsword that cleft his backbone apart.

He had despatched the four men in one devastating moment—or so it seemed to the Abbess. She stood there, shocked, eyes wide open as Hawk cut her bonds.

"Stay here!"

She was still rooted to the spot when her young rescuer retraced his steps back to the monastery.

One other watched his progress back to the chapel doors.

"I cannot help you further, Lord Hawk," Meena breathed to herself. "Only you can shape your future destiny. The gods go with you."

Hawk disappeared into the smoke haze that hung like a cloud in front of the double doors: all that was left of the woman's magic.

His silhouette rested in the doorway until his eyes could pierce the gloom and see what lay before him.

A moment ago the chapel had boiled with men, the clash of weapons, the shrieks of the dying.

Now their corpses lay strewn like discarded oddments.

On the steps at his feet Hawk saw the body of Ranulf, the dagger protruding from his back. His stomach churned. One more life wasted on this vendetta.

A moaning shape attracted his attention. The elf lay against a pillar. Quivering movements still showed that life beat within that badly-wounded frame. But for how long, wondered Hawk?

Across from him Gort stood, arms outstretched, roped to two pillars. Blood had run from a gash on his head down his face, congealing in dark streaks. His eyes blazed for an instant at Hawk's appearance but then he slumped in defeat. A guard held a sword at his belly.

Hawk took in the plight of the noosed nuns. Chak stood beside them, one boot resting on the table. A swift kick and the sisters would die horribly. The expression on his face pleaded with Hawk to attempt something and let him satisfy his wish to execute the innocent women.

Like a spider, Voltan sat in front of them, his sword resting across his thighs, facing Hawk. The fact that this man had wiped out almost all his warriors worried him little. They were fodder. Easily replaced.

Now, Hawk," he said in triumph. "This is the moment of my revenge. On my command I will have these counters of beads hung and your giant friend will have his heart skewered."

Hawk clenched his teeth.

"What do you want?"

"You! Always you!"

"Let the sisters and Gort go free and I shall be your prisoner."

Voltan stormed erect, strode over to adopt a dominating position above his brother on the entrance steps, his sword pointing at the nape of Hawk's neck.

"You still don't understand," he hissed venomously. "You are in no position to bargain. Throw down your sword. *Now!"*

Hawk had no option. He bent down and laid the mindsword reluctantly on the paved floor.

"And your vestment," added Voltan gloatingly.

Gort tried to make a weak protest but his guard dug his sword point at his chest.

Hawk slowly divested himself of his harness and chain mail shirt which fell heavily to the stone floor.

Voltan circled past his defenceless brother, kicked the mindsword into a corner.

"On your knees, little brother," he directed Hawk. "If you have a God to pray to, pray to him now."

His eerie laugh floated across to Hawk who kneeled like a suppliant.

He unhooked the crucifix about his neck and quietly, as if in defeat, held it between his hands.

Voltan could not take his eyes off the simple cross. He remembered it from some other time. It had been hers. Eliane's. She had given it to Hawk. His eyes narrowed as he recalled that day by the lake. How he had hesitated for a fatal instant on that occasion. His hand touched the grill on his helmet. There would be no equivocation this time.

"Enough!" he barked. "You have prayed enough."

Hawk also remembered Eliane.

She had hung the crucifix around his neck and said: "Wear it. It will protect you."

They were the only ones who knew the secret of the talisman.

Now his finger pressed the prominent boss on it, loosing a hidden spring which flicked out a secret blade.

One small weapon and three targets.

Chak, the hangman by the altar; the guard pressing the sword at Gort's heart; or Voltan himself.

"Gort!" cried Hawk.

The crucifix knife sped from his hand and sliced through one of the giant's bonds. His hand free, he reached for his mighty hammer and hurled it at Chak.

The colossal weight of it took Voltan's lieutenant full in the front. His chest caved in and he was hurtled bodily off his feet to be smashed against the church wall. He was in agony for an awful moment until his pulped insides let him die.

In one fluid movement, the minute Gort had released the hammer, his fist bunched into the throat of his guard. His windpipe smashed, he scrabbled at his neck while his eyes bugged out on stalks from his head. He also suffered before he died.

Everything happened so fast that Voltan was frozen into inactivity. As the horror of what had happened flooded his mind, he screamed his hate, rushed at Hawk to stop abruptly.

The mindsword sparked with a green glow and zoomed into Hawk's waiting hand.

"So!" Voltan exhaled the syllable explosively. "You have found the ancient power which is rightly mine."

Hawk watched Voltan intently.

"Ten thousand times have I dreamed of killing you." Voltan retreated, turned away, but his right hand sought out a hidden dagger. Silently he readied it. "Slowly … painfully …"

He spun on his heel. The dagger blurred towards Hawk. But the mindsword moved faster, deflected the sliver of steel.

Like a panther Voltan sprang at his brother, sword thirsting for blood. He lunged, mingling left and right slashes. His sheer bull strength had always given him victory but Hawk was imbued with an uncanny strength lent by the green-hilted sword.

Blade caught blade.

The shock slammed back into both men's shoulders and the clangour rang on and on in the echoing chamber.

Steel flashes cut lightning swathes.

Voltan drove in with all his might. Hawk intercepted his impetus and fended him away with ease. Voltan's charge carried him staggering up on to the steps.

A wordless roar issued from his lips. In a frenzy he crisscrossed the air with slices and cuts and leapt down at his brother.

Hawk's sword evaded the whirling, twisting blade of his enemy, slipped through the flashing web of steel and plunged under Voltan's breastbone straight out the other side.

Voltan lurched aimlessly, the vaulted ceiling of the church revolving. A voice told him to stay upright. But he crumpled to the ground. His incredible strength strove to make him get back on his feet. The helmet was wrenched from his head to expose the wounded, raw flesh. He rolled on his back.

"Brother," he gasped, trying to focus his darkening vision.

Hawk kneeled by his side, the mindsword glowing on his lap.

"Brother," repeated Voltan. The image of Hawk danced between a blur and an icy countenance. "I shall wait for you at the gates of Hell."

This last word gurgled in his throat. He slumped back.

Crow, heavily bandaged, stood at the door of the chapel, watched Hawk pull the chest of gold from the stone plinth he himself had crouched upon many a time in the past few days.

The Abbess patted his hand and called to Hawk as he gave the money box to the already mounted Gort while he swung himself up on to his own horse.

"Your friend will soon recover his strength." A cloud passed over her face. "But I grieve for the others who died."

"I know you will see that they rest well," replied Hawk gently.

A nun rushed from the monastery bearing a bag of food and a skin of wine. "For your journey," she told Gort.

He looked at her and saw another little nun. The memory hurt. Somehow the sister understood and smiled compassionately at him. To hide his embarrassment he changed the subject. "There's a lot of eating and drinking money here, my friend," he winked at Hawk. "I don't suppose—"

Hawk reproached him for the thought with a twinkle in his eye. He saluted the Abbess and Crow, spurred his horse and they were gone.

The sun streamed into the High Abbot's cell. Spring had come and there was a new warmth in the morning air.

"My heart is heavy at the loss of your friends," said the holy man to Hawk and Gort. "It was a high price to pay."

"The price *is* always high," accorded Hawk. He indicated the chest of gold. "Use it well."

The High Abbot nodded gravely.

"Where will you go now, Lord Hawk?"

"Gort follows his own path. As do I."

"Yes, I've heard tell of fat barons with great stores of winter food and wine to protect," the giant rumbled. "It would seem I am the man

for that work."

He patted his stomach and the High Abbot allowed himself a small smile.

"May God go with you," were his final words to them.

They rode down the mountain path fairly quickly and soon reached the crossroads where their paths would diverge. There, a familiar figure in rags sat waiting.

"The Dark One—" began Meena.

"—is no more!" finished Hawk.

She was silent.

"Black wizards gather in the south," she pronounced finally. "Follow your destiny."

Gort gazed at Hawk.

"When you get that look in your face—" he warned.

"You did say south, Mother?" asked Hawk.

"Ah well," sighed Gort. "Who wants to work with fat old barons anyway." He pulled his horse's head around. "South it is."

Hawk nodded to the woman and both riders galloped off down the dusty path.

"We shall meet again," whispered Meena.

# EPILOGUE

The bodies lay in the main chamber of the monastery. It was silent as the grave.

From nothing, a point of blackness started, became a blot, a pool of Stygian night. Out of this jet miasma glided a tall creature who moved to one particular corpse.

“We have further use for you, Dark One,” hissed the Black Wizard.

Effortlessly he enveloped the body of Voltan within his cloak and disappeared back into the inky darkness from which he had sprung.

The evil had begun once more …